



# Mitchell Johnson

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Mitchell Johnson of Menlo Park, California—an American Academy in Rome Visiting Artist (2015) and a Josef and Anni Albers Foundation Artist in Residence (2007)—is the subject of the monograph, *Color as Content*, and the documentary film, *The Artist of Silicon Valley*. Johnson's color- and shape-driven paintings are known for their very personal approach to color and have been exhibited in Milan, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Johnson divides his time between his favorite painting locations in Europe, New England, New York City, Asia, and California. His paintings are in the collections of 28 museums and over 600 private collections. The most recent museum acquisitions were by Museo Morandi in Bologna, Museum of Modern Art in Rome, Tucson Museum of Art, and Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento. Johnson moved to the Bay Area in 1990 after finishing his MFA at Parsons in New York. Follow [@mitchell\\_johnson\\_artist](https://www.instagram.com/mitchell_johnson_artist) on instagram to stay informed about exhibits, color talks, color workshops and new publications.

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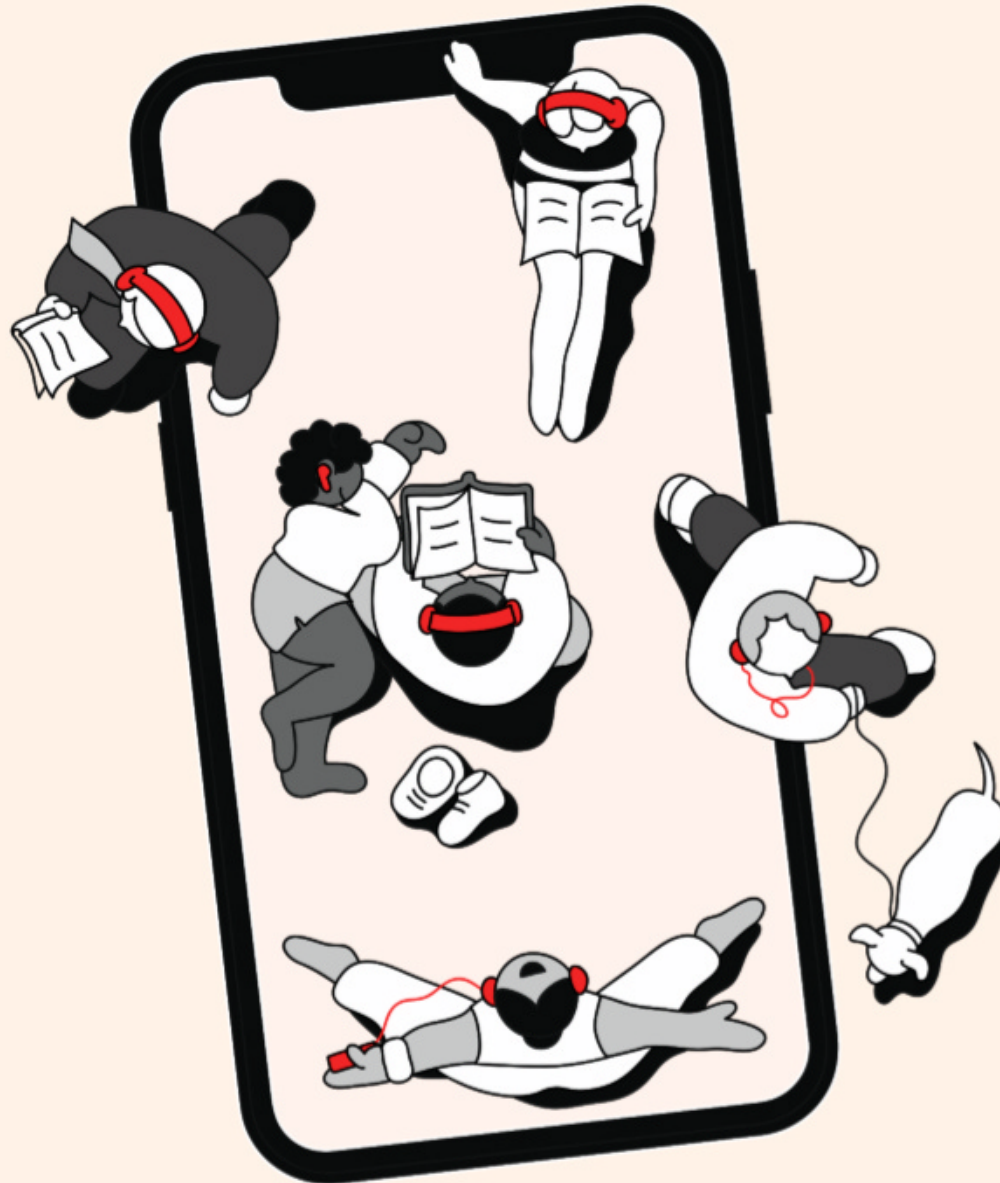
AUG. 17, 2020

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**DRAWINGS** Emma Hunsinger, Roz Chast, Kendra Allenby,  
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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Peter Hessler** (*"How China Controlled the Virus,"* p. 28) is a staff writer. His latest book is *"The Buried."*

**Zadie Smith** (*"Who Is to Be Master,"* p. 23) is the author of, most recently, *"Intimations."* This piece also appears in *"Toyin Ojih Odutola: A Countervailing Theory,"* which is published in conjunction with the artist's exhibition at the Barbican, in London.

**Dan Kaufman** (*"The Last Stand,"* p. 16) published *"The Fall of Wisconsin"* in 2018.

**Madhuri Vijay** (*Fiction*, p. 50), the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, is the author of *"The Far Field."*

**Wayne Thiebaud** (*Cover*) is a professor emeritus of art at the University of California, Davis.

**Traci Brimhall** (*Poem*, p. 55), the director of creative writing at Kansas State University, published a new poetry collection, *"Come the Slumberless to the Land of Nod,"* this year.

**Jon Lee Anderson** (*"Wanderlust,"* p. 40), a staff writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1998. He has written several books, including *"Che Guevara."*

**Alexandra Schwartz** (*Books*, p. 65) joined the magazine in 2013, and has been a staff writer since 2016.

**Terrance Hayes** (*Poem*, p. 32), a former MacArthur Fellow, is the author of *"American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin"* and *"To Float in the Space Between."*

**Anna Russell** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 14), previously a member of the magazine's editorial staff, became a contributing writer last year.

**Sunil Khilnani** (*Books*, p. 59) is the author of *"Incarnations"* and *"The Idea of India."*

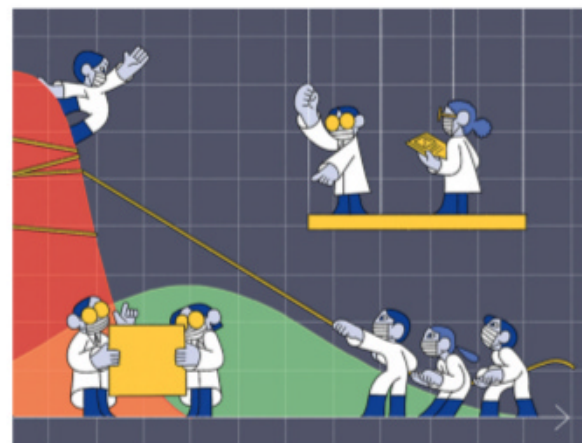
**Alex Ross** (*Musical Events*, p. 68) has been the magazine's music critic since 1996. His third book, *"Wagnerism,"* will come out in September.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



### DISPATCH

Ana Karina Zatarain joins mothers of Mexico's disappeared in the search for their children.



### MEDICAL DISPATCH

Howard Markel, who helped develop the concept of "flattening the curve," on what comes next.

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## DOLLAR FOR DOLLAR

Alec MacGillis's piece on the violence plaguing dollar stores offers a depressing glimpse into economic decline in major Midwestern cities ("The Dollar Store Deaths," July 6th & 13th). I lived in St. Louis from 1936 until 1963, and was moved by the stories that MacGillis tells. Based on my years of academic research into the economic problems that cities face, I believe that dollar stores are more often a symptom than a cause of this decline. The way to address the issues that cities such as St. Louis and Dayton are confronting is not merely to improve the conditions at dollar stores. Rather, we need to look toward a guaranteed income for all, enhanced gun control, and a radical reconception of racial justice.

*Alphonse Holtmann  
Professor Emeritus, Economics  
University of Miami  
Coral Gables, Fla.*

## AN ARGENTINE VIEWPOINT

I congratulate Larissa MacFarquhar on her vivid, intimate portrait of the Falkland Islands and their inhabitants, particularly considering the demanding nature of her reporting ("An Ocean Apart," July 6th & 13th). But I would like to call attention to her unfortunately partial treatment of the Argentine claim to sovereignty over the islands. MacFarquhar fails to mention that Argentina, which declared independence from Spain in 1816, considers the Falklands (or the Malvinas, as they are called in South America) to be part of the territory that it legitimately inherited. Buenos Aires had been the capital of a political region ruled by Spain, and although pieces peeled off, forming Paraguay, Bolivia, and Uruguay, Argentina claimed sovereignty over the remaining territory. In the early years of European colonial expansion, assertions of sovereignty could consist of little more than a beach landing, the assignation of a name, and, as MacFarquhar indicates, the installation of a plaque. Pos-

session, however, depended on military enforcement: de-facto control trumped de-jure possession. But by the eighteenth century, sovereignty could mean the grouping of peoples and territories under established laws: legal right reinforced military might.

MacFarquhar writes that, in 1833, "the British reclaimed the islands"—a simplistic summary of the moment when an outmanned, outgunned Argentine vessel heeded an English ship's order to leave the islands. The islands fell under British rule, which, with the exception of an Argentine intervention, in 1982, has persisted. Today, Britain largely rests its case for sovereignty on its de-facto control of the islands and the fact that current inhabitants have democratically ratified this control—whereas Argentina argues that nothing nullifies the original sin of a British occupation that it deems illegal and an absence of de-jure territorial possession.

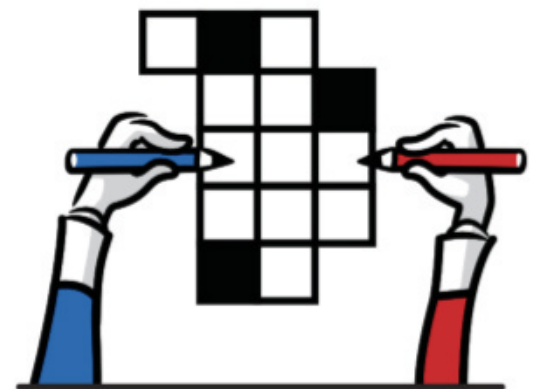
MacFarquhar describes Argentina's position, in part, as the claim that "British forces on the islands are there to prevent islanders from escaping to Argentina"—an outlandish statement perhaps based on comments reportedly made by Jorge Argüello, Argentina's Ambassador to the United States. This does not reflect Argentina's formal position on the islands, which is outlined in its constitution. MacFarquhar, who had thousands of words at her disposal, surely could have acknowledged the complexity of this territorial dispute, which the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization considers valid enough to review annually. The fact that she chose to overlook Argentina's viewpoint makes it seem as if she preferred to avoid analyzing counterpositions to the British claim on the islands.

*Cush Rodríguez Moz  
Buenos Aires, Argentina*

•

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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, most New York City venues are closed.  
Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.*

AUGUST 12 – 18, 2020



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Immortalized by the Ramones in their 1977 punk-rock anthem of the same name, **Rockaway Beach** (pictured) remains a favorite place for New Yorkers looking to escape the heat of the city. (“Rockaway” is the Anglicized version of *reckourwacky*, which means “sandy place” in the language of the Lenape people, who originally lived there.) This summer, masks are required on all city beaches—as is social distancing—but swimmers can remove them before venturing into the water, when lifeguards are on duty.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KARINE LAVAL



## ART

### Art 21

Ten days after 9/11, when people's spirits desperately needed a lift, PBS aired the first episode of "Art in the Twenty-first Century," a fly-on-the-wall documentary series that bet (with all due respect to Sister Wendy) that artists are the best guides to their own work. Maya Lin, Sally Mann, and Kerry James Marshall were among those who welcomed cameras into their studios for the first season. So did the sculptor Andrea Zittel, whose functional sleeping pods in the California desert now look like enviable spots for social distancing. Today, after nine broadcast seasons—a tenth arrives later this year—two Peabody Awards, an Emmy nomination, and many digital shorts produced for its Web site, Art 21 is streaming more than five hundred films. Subjects range from household names (Marina Abramović and Ai Weiwei) to young painters on the rise (Aliza Nisenbaum, Avery Singer) to the Bay Area-based social-practice artist Stephanie Syjuco, whose most recent project was sewing COVID-19 masks for food-bank volunteers, the families of medical workers, and others in need. Art 21 also bundles its films into visual "playlists," with running times of one to two hours; to combat cabin fever, watch fourteen artists take to the open road in "En Route."—*Andrea K. Scott (art21.org)*

### The Frick Online

Why does the art of what we term the Old Masters have so much more soulful heft than that of most moderns and nearly all of our contemporaries? I think the reason is a routine consciousness of mortality. Never mind the explicitness of that time's memento mori, all the skulls and guttering candles. I am talking about an awareness that's invisible, but palpable, in Rembrandt's nights—his fatalistic self-portrait in the Frick comes to mind. The peculiarly intense insouciance of a Boucher or a Fragonard—the sensuous frolics of France's ancien régime—protests, in favor of life, rather too much. Young folk dallying at court provide the sole but turbulent drama in "The Progress of Love," the museum's marvellous suite of Fragonard paintings. When we are again free to wander museums, the objects won't have altered, but we will have, and the casualties of the coronavirus will accompany us spectrally. Until, inevitably, we begin to forget, we will have been reminded of our oneness throughout the world and across time with all the living and the dead. (The Frick is undergoing renovations; next year, it will temporarily relocate to the former Met Breuer. Guides to Boucher, Fragonard, and Rembrandt are available on the museum's Web site.)—*Peter Schjeldahl (frick.org)*

### Gordon Parks

This great Black photographer, who was born in Kansas to tenant farmers, chronicled Jim Crow America with devastating insight. In a 1942 portrait commissioned by the Farm Security Administration, a government charwoman holds a broom in front of an out-of-focus American flag—an enduring emblem of inequality. In another famous image, a lush color scene from 1956, a chic Black woman and a little girl stand outside a department

store, under a sign that reads "Colored Entrance." The pair face in the opposite direction of the sign's neon arrow—an unintentional moment, perhaps, but a symbol of resistance nonetheless. The particular focus of this "Virtual Views" exhibition on MOMA's Web site is a moody, meditative photo essay titled "The Atmosphere of Crime," published in *Life* magazine. Assigned in response to a purported national crime wave, Parks's investigation took him to the streets of New York City, on raids with Chicago cops, and to San Quentin prison, during the execution of Thomas L. Johnston. An illuminating video of a recent discussion with the scholars Khalil Muhammad and Nicole Fleetwood, moderated by Sarah Meister, underscores the photographer's complex depiction of policing and incarceration—a view at once critical and empathetic, which survived the predictable narrative forwarded by his

white editors at the time and remains terribly germane today.—*Johanna Fateman (moma.org)*

### "Noplace"

The five artists in this exhibition at the P.P.O.W. gallery work in the terrain between absurdism and speculative fantasy. Although the gallery offers an engaging facsimile on its Web site, the show's through-the-looking-glass quality is best appreciated in person. Near the entrance, Devin N. Morris's arborlike construction of found doors suggests a portal to the makeshift, queer world of his art, which is also represented by a second installation made of salvaged materials and a colorful, figurative painting. The collaborative duo Ficus Interfaith makes a striking impression with an elongated riff on the Stars and Stripes; the twelve-foot-long composition, fashioned from inlaid terrazzo, feels at once

## AT THE GALLERIES



"There is nothing you can see that is not a flower," a haiku by Basho begins. **Karma**, the enterprising gallery and bookstore in the East Village, takes those words to heart in an uncommonly good summer show (through Sept. 13) with a simple conceit: floral paintings by fifty-nine artists. The gallerist Brendan Dugan is also an accomplished book designer (a catalogue, with essays by Hilton Als and Helen Molesworth, is coming soon), and the visual intelligence of the exhibition, the flow and the syncopation of images, delivers almost as much pleasure as the paintings themselves. The arch melancholy of "Broken Flowers" (above), from 2020, a study in opacity and transparency by the Finnish-born Parisian newcomer Henni Alftan, becomes sharper and stranger in the intimate company of Susan Jane Walp's trance of a still-life—blueberries offset by a hollyhock blossom—from 2000, which opens into the lemon joys of a Peter Doig oil on board, from 1989. Sometimes flowers mark mourning. In 2017, Jennifer Packer painted a lush, nearly abstract arrangement in green, blue, and gold, to honor Sandra Bland, who died in a Texas jail. The picture's title is as intensely simple as any haiku: "Say Her Name."—*Andrea K. Scott*



## OUTDOOR DANCE



The organizers of the **Kaatsbaan Summer Festival** have taken advantage of the wide-open space at their disposal—a hundred-and-fifty-three-acre property in Tivoli, New York—and their proximity to the city to create an outdoor summer dance festival, a rarity in 2020. Every weekend until the end of September, the festival presents a half-hour show for a socially distant, masked audience of up to fifty. Week three (Aug. 15-16) is hosted by Christopher Wheeldon, who directed and choreographed “An American in Paris.” For the occasion, Robert Fairchild (the star of that show) and Chris Jarosz perform Wheeldon’s moody pas de deux “Us.” Lloyd Knight, one of the festival’s artistic advisers—and one of the most striking dancers in the Martha Graham Dance Company—has co-created a duet with Tamisha Guy, who dances with the company A.I.M. And the tapper Claudia Rahardjanoto performs a solo. Tickets are free, but registration is required. It’s well worth the drive.—*Marina Harss*

officials and satirical. Raque Ford’s gestural paintings on translucent polypropylene are suspended from the ceiling by chains; Joel Dean’s alphabet-themed symbolist canvases convey a strangely ghastly yet whimsical realm. Guadalupe Maravilla’s shrinelike mixed-media sculpture, titled “Disease Thrower #4,” which merges references to pre-colonial Central American rituals and personal mythology, is the show’s immersive climax.—*J.F. (ppowgallery.com)*

## DANCE

### Battery Dance Festival

Broadcast on YouTube this year, rather than set in a park with a view of New York Harbor, the festival, Aug. 14-22, remains impressively robust, diverse, and international, with fifty-two works, twenty-eight of which are premières. Each evening has a different theme, including dances from Africa, the Middle East, or Europe; female choreographers; Black voices. The lineup for the Indian-dance program, on Aug. 15, looks especially stellar, boasting the likes of Bijayini Satpathy, Kapila Venu, and Aakash Odedra.—*Brian Seibert (batterydance.org/battery-dance-festival)*

### Drive East 2020: Sanctuary

One of the (few) advantages of watching dance on a screen is that you can see performances that take place far, far away. Normally, this excellent festival of Indian dance brings dancers from India to New York, but this year (Aug. 9-16) the virtual format takes the viewer to the dancers, who are in Chennai, Bangalore, Delhi, and Assam, as well as San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles. As a result, the offerings are especially varied. On Aug. 13, at 6 P.M., Anwesa Mahanta, in Assam, performs *sattriya* dance, a style developed by monks as a form of devotion to Krishna. The broadcasts, which are all live and ticketed, will be shown only once. Dancers and musicians need to eat, too.—*Marina Harss (driveeast.org/tickets)*

### SF Ballet @ Home

San Francisco Ballet’s latest virtual offering, premiering on Aug. 13 on the company’s social-media channels, is “Dance of Dreams,” a film directed by Benjamin Millepied. Lasting around six minutes, it’s short but sumptuous. The music is lush—“Scène d’Amour,” from Bernard Herrmann’s score for “Vertigo,” recorded remotely by members of the ballet’s orchestra. Four well-known choreographers—Justin Peck, Dwight Rhoden, Janie Taylor, and Christopher

Wheeldon—contribute a distinctive solo or duet, which principal dancers and soloists perform with a sense of release. Yet the attention stealers are the tourist-brochure settings: the sea cliffs of Sausalito, the fluted columns of the Palace of Fine Arts, the Golden Gate Bridge in fog.—*B.S. (sfballet.org/sf-ballet-home)*

### Urban Bush Women

The Joyce Theatre streams Urban Bush Women’s “Women’s Resistance,” Aug. 13-21. The eleven-minute segment—an excerpt from “Les écailles de la mémoire” (“The scales of memory”), a 2008 collaboration between the group’s founding artistic director, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and the Senegalese matriarch of contemporary African dance, Germaine Acogny—offers exactly what its stand-alone title advertises. In a performance filmed at the Joyce in January, the company’s powerful women face off against an unseen aggressor, punching, kicking, leaping, and sitting into what looks like a martial form of the twist.—*B.S. (joyce.org/joycestream)*

### “Virtual Works & Process”

Since April, Works & Process Artists has commissioned dozens of short videos from illustrious dancers and choreographers, all created while social distancing. This week’s additions feature couples. The New York City Ballet principal dancers Adrian Danchig-Waring and Joseph Gordon offer a retro music video for a synth-pop song by the duo HIPS, in which languid bed-and-bath shots build to bravura moves en plein air. Alejandro Cerrudo and Ana Lopez make witty use of cinematic reverse motion: tissue paper, dancing to Bach, lands on faces or between kissing lips. That’s cute, but not quite as adorable and affecting as a video released earlier this month by another City Ballet couple, Ashley Laracey and Troy Schumacher. Theirs is a sped-up day in the life of dancers at home with infant twins.—*B.S. (worksandprocess.org)*

## MUSIC

### Bang on a Can Marathon

**CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL** Earlier this month, the New York City composers collective Bang on a Can undertook, eagerly and cautiously, live performances in the presence of an audience, on the spacious grounds of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Now it returns with fresh vigor to the live-streaming platform that it has adopted throughout the pandemic. The group’s latest online marathon, its third, features a distinguished phalanx of artists, including Jeremy Denk, Oliver Lake, Shara Nova, and Tyondai Braxton. Scattered throughout the six-hour concert are no fewer than eleven newly commissioned pieces receiving their world premières. The event is presented free of charge; donations are encouraged.—*Steve Smith (Aug. 16, from 3 to 9, at marathon2020.bangonacan.org.)*

### Bard SummerScape: “Upstreaming”

**OPERA** Known for presenting fringe pieces loosely tethered to mainstream opera history, Bard SummerScape has a way of making every obscure revival feel interesting and urgent. Having scut-



tled its summer season, the organization delves into its archive of rarely staged pieces and makes them available through its Web site as part of its “Upstreaming” initiative. The choices reveal the conductor and artistic co-director Leon Botstein’s penchant for the bursting, bountiful, and luxurious sounds associated with Romanticism—Chabrier’s “Le Roi Malgré Lui,” Rubinstein’s “Demon,” Dvořák’s “Dimitrij,” Korngold’s “The Miracle of Heliane,” and Richard Strauss’s “Die Liebe der Danae.”—*Oussama Zahr*

## Dominic Fike: “What Could Possibly Go Wrong”

**POP RAP** Insouciance has become a calling card for the twenty-four-year-old artist and guitarist Dominic Fike, who inked a multimillion-dollar deal with Columbia Records after his demos started circulating online, a few years ago. His style of rap-singing over acidic surf guitars is laid-back and uncalculated—particularly on his debut record, “What Could Possibly Go Wrong,” which collects capricious sound wisps that are often just a minute or two long. His briskness can be refreshing on songs such as “Good Game” and “Double Negative,” but elsewhere his idleness and indifference grate: “I hope they banish me, I miss my family tree,” he sings on “Cancel Me,” a petulant rebuke of fame. He touches on police brutality and his time in jail, but, as with much on the album, his thoughts are brief and fleeting.—*Julyssa Lopez*

## Le Ren: “Morning & Melancholia”

**FOLK** The EP “Morning & Melancholia” opens the curtains on the talented Montreal singer Lauren Spear, who performs under the name Le Ren. The musician’s arrival is haunted by a heartbreaking departure: the death of her ex-boyfriend two years ago. On a full-length album, Spear’s personal tragedy might color the overarching mood, but in the tighter confines of an EP it dominates the proceedings so thoroughly that her loss shrouds the record’s every note, lyric, and moan of pedal steel. Throughout the set’s three original compositions and lone cover (Dallas Frazier’s “The Day I Lose My Mind”), Le Ren stares down a fractured love and a harrowing farewell, all in a crystalline voice that sounds too young to hold such anguish.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

## Maria Schneider Orchestra: “Data Lords”

**JAZZ** The prodigiously gifted composer, arranger, and bandleader Maria Schneider has a whole lot on her mind these days, and much of it has made its way into her impressive new double CD, “Data Lords.” In the liner notes, she states that disk one addresses her ambivalence toward the technological universe and disk two her bond with the natural world, but such an expansive work—like all programmatic instrumental pieces—carries the burden of making a case for its own relevance. Without the use of words, Schneider’s preoccupations remain ambiguous, though she exhibits a masterly control of bold and inventive tonal landscapes and subtler orchestral shadings. These potent settings provide a backdrop for a cache of splendid soloists, including the guitarist Ben Monder, the saxophon-

ists Scott Robinson and Donny McCaslin, and the accordionist Gary Versace.—*Steve Futterman*

## Sonic Youth Live Archive

**ROCK** Since the lockdown began, Steve Shelley, the drummer and archivist for the disbanded New York alt-rock trailblazers Sonic Youth, has uploaded to Bandcamp more than twenty live concerts from the group’s thirty-year history, with new entries appearing regularly. It’s a feast, drawing from the band’s entire studio repertoire—and, in some cases, bettering it. “Live in Los Angeles 1998” renders the material from the autumnal “A Thousand Leaves” with vivid authority, and “Live in Irvine 1990” does much the same with that year’s “Goo,” transforming the band’s poppiest songs into gleefully bent arena rock. And “Live at City Gardens 1987” features a rare treat: “Expressway to Yr. Skull,” typically a barn-burning climax, gets perfectly cast as a mid-set exclamation mark.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

## Taylor Swift: “folklore”

**POP** Taylor Swift’s “folklore” isn’t a folk record, nor is it particularly autobiographical. Instead, Swift is interested in the idea of storytelling—of

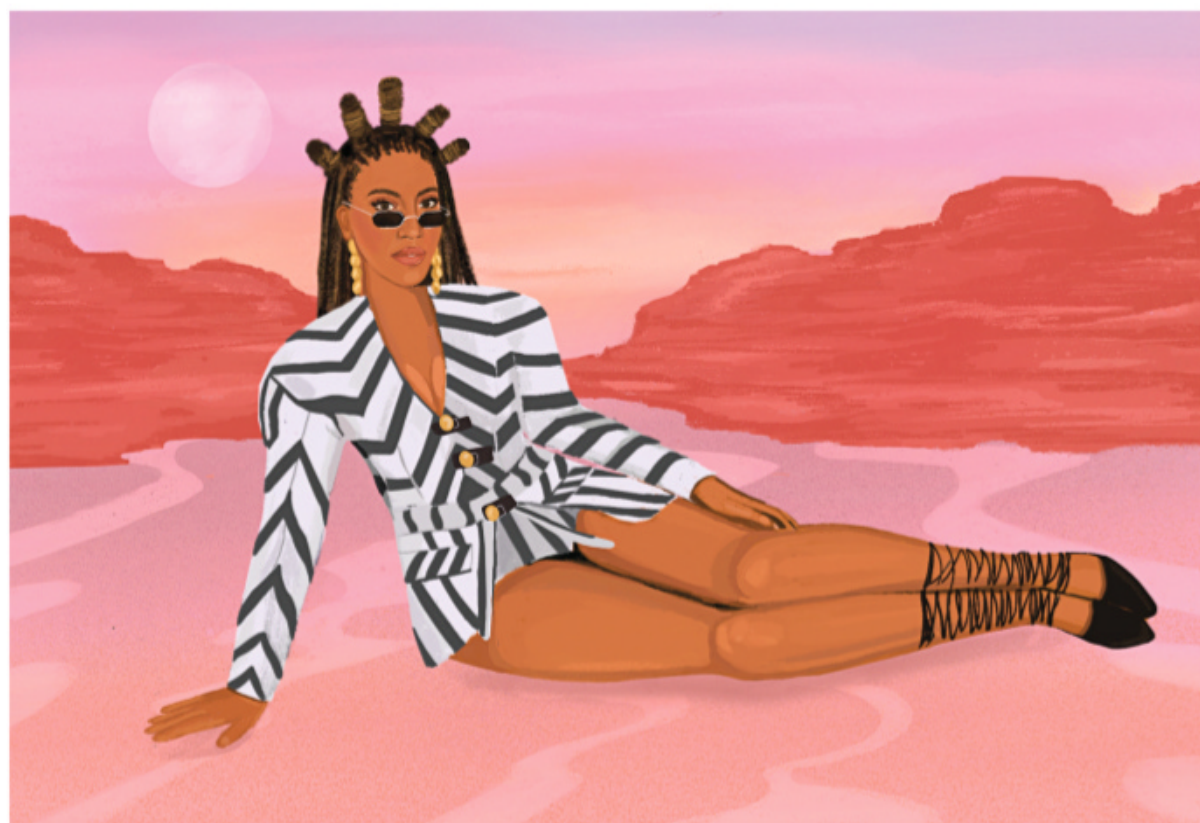
folklore, writ large—as a kind of sense-making process. Musically, “folklore” feels mostly genreless, though it drifts toward gauzy, atmospheric pop. Aaron Dessner, who plays guitar in the National, co-wrote or co-produced eleven of the album’s sixteen songs, and his presence softens it, folding in hazy strings, some mysterious percussion, and a few quietly anxious builds. All the characters Swift invents, borrows, and briefly inhabits here are stuck between acquiescing to the momentum of their lives and wresting control of their own stories. She may purposefully inhabit different perspectives—and no one can blame her for seeking a bit of respite from public confession—but “folklore” reiterates that we’re all confused and trying in the same ways. The human experience, however fractured and refracted, is still very much shared.—*Amanda Petrusich (Originally published on July 24.)*

## MOVIES

### An American Pickle

Piety and sentiment overwhelm the inspired concept of this comedic fantasy, based on a series

## POP



Last year, Beyoncé curated “The Gift,” a soundtrack inspired by Disney’s ambitious, if hollow, C.G.I. remake of “The Lion King.” She voiced Nala in the film, but her bigger contribution was the fusion of pop and Afrobeats that she called “a love letter to Africa.” Her new visual album, “**Black Is King**,” could have been a simple collection of videos set to the record’s songs, but the project bloomed into a full-blown cinematic experience, celebrating African ancestry and the Black diaspora—and arriving squarely amid conversations about Black oppression. Lavish sequences generate a rich iconography: an emerald-green tea party attended by all Black women, a white butler brushing Beyoncé’s glowing teeth, a dreamlike debutante ball. Some of the effort’s intentions are buried in abstractions, but “Black Is King” is an aesthetic feat that revels in its exquisite presentations of Blackness. “We were beauty before they knew what beauty was,” Beyoncé says early on.—*Julyssa Lopez*



of much more acerbic pieces in *The New Yorker* by Simon Rich (who wrote the script). Seth Rogen plays Herschel Greenbaum, a thirtyish Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe who, in 1920, falls into a vat of pickles in a Brooklyn factory where he works—and, a hundred years later, he emerges intact and vigorous. After an initial burst of publicity, Herschel is soon united with his only surviving descendant, his identical great-grandson, Ben Greenbaum (also Rogen), a lonely and awkward app developer in Brooklyn, whose life he promptly ruins. Herschel—relying on his long-ago work experience—becomes an artisanal-pickle vender and then an Internet celebrity who must face the risks of fame while confronting Ben's enmity. Unfortunately, the director, Brandon Trost, exhausts most of the fun in the exposition; the effortful satirical flashes of sociopolitical relevance yield a paean to tradition and family and reduce the clever clash of history and modernity to clichés.—*Richard Brody* (Streaming on HBO Max.)

### A Bigger Splash

Jack Hazan's film about the painter David Hockney is forty-six years old, but in this new restoration it looks as bright and unabashed as ever. Does it count as a documentary? Yes,

in that Hockney is on camera for much of the time, joined by friends and comrades from the art world—supporting players from the early nineteen-seventies, such as the fashion designers Ossie Clark and Celia Birtwell, a married couple. We also see Hockney at work on “Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures),” which features his lover Peter Schlesinger. On the other hand, many scenes, though unscripted, are clearly set up, and Hazan thinks nothing of cutting away to passages of fantasy, some of them erotically charged. By means of suggestive editing, plus a potent score by Patrick Gowers, Hazan makes us feel that we are watching a mystery. Naturally, no solution is provided.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 6/24/19.) (Streaming on Amazon.)

### An Easy Girl

The plot of Rebecca Zlotowski's passionate and finely observed drama is bracingly spare: at the end of the school year, Naïma (Mina Farid), a sixteen-year-old girl in Cannes whose mother works in a hotel kitchen, is visited by Sofia (Zahia Dehar), her twenty-two-year-old Parisian cousin who's living in the fast lane and making money with no obvious form of work. Sofia befriends a pair of high-finance yachtsmen

(Nuno Lopes and Benoît Magimel), and, for about ten days, Naïma follows her into their high-society orbit, savoring its comforts and thrilling to its temptations—and then Naïma returns to her ordinary life. From this simple premise, Zlotowski develops a complex array of dramatic subtleties and psychological nuances and, with poised yet urgent images that stay close to Naïma, evokes the character's conflicting impulses and shifting ideas. Against the backdrop of Naïma's regular life—including her friendship with a gay classmate who's an aspiring actor (Lakdhar Dridi)—her partly perceptive and partly bewildered view of the rich and the powerful emerges as a crucial apprenticeship in the ways of the world. In French.—*R.B.* (Streaming on Netflix.)

### King: A Filmed Record . . . Montgomery to Memphis

This 1970 documentary, produced by Ely Landau, conveys grief and bewilderment at the loss of the political and moral leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. Running more than three hours, it's composed almost entirely of archival film clips of King's work with the civil-rights movement, detailing the visionary strategies, the galvanizing passion, and the agonies of the bus boycott in Montgomery, the Freedom Rides to integrate interstate transit, and the drive for voting rights that led from Selma to Montgomery. The March on Washington culminates in the entire sixteen minutes of King's historic speech. The movie also emphasizes the wide range of his activism, including his opposition to the Vietnam War and his battles against economic injustice. An extended set of clips from 1966 show King leading a march in Chicago for equal access to housing, in the face of a violent counterdemonstration by thousands of white residents—some brandishing “White Power” signs, Confederate flags, and swastikas. It's a reminder that the movement's scope was not only Southern but also national—and that its struggle continues.—*R.B.* (Streaming on Kino Now, Amazon, Kanopy, and other services.)

### Silver Lode

This understatedly lucid 1954 Western, directed by Allan Dwan, is one of the greatest. A U.S. marshal, Fred McCarty (Dan Duryea), interrupts a wedding to arrest the bridegroom, the rancher Dan Ballard (John Payne), for the murder of McCarty's brother. Though Ballard claims innocence, the mob turns against him and the bodies start piling up. In this McCarthy-era allegory, Dwan bares the community's social structure, linking courthouse and whorehouse; a climactic battle in the telegraph office traces the town's very survival to the power of modern communications. The camera (thanks to John Alton's cinematography) traverses the town's length and breadth in a thrillingly relentless tracking shot, and depicts in jagged diagonals the trust-rending violence that cuts through it. Dwan hazards a sardonic deployment of the American flag, and devises bell-tower symbolism to rival that of “Vertigo”; in his calmly furious view, the town's sweet order spins into chaos from fear of disorder.—*R.B.* (Streaming on Amazon Prime.)

## WHAT TO STREAM



A romantic melodrama of gender ambiguity that swerves into screwball comedy and back, “**Sylvia Scarlett**,” from 1935, is among the most boldly idiosyncratic films of Hollywood's studio era. (It's on TCM on Aug. 16 and available to stream.) Katharine Hepburn, who'd already won an Oscar for Best Actress, plays a young Englishwoman who disguises herself as a boy to sneak her embezzler father (Edmund Gwenn) from Marseille to London, provoking the flirtations of both women and men. Cary Grant, not yet a star, plays an English grifter who teams up with them to launch a new life of crime and romance—and a new sideline, show business. The movie's director, George Cukor, sets the group's sordid schemes awhirl with giddy revelry and unveils the grim realities of scuffling troupers—along with the desires and frustrations that put the whole machine in motion. The daring film flopped, and Hepburn's career recovered only in 1940, via another collaboration with Grant and Cukor: “The Philadelphia Story.”—*Richard Brody*

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Black Chefs at Maison Yaki 626 Vanderbilt Ave., Brooklyn

The other day, as I spoke to the chef Michelle Williams by phone, she paused to explain a faint beeping. “Oh, sorry, that’s a timer,” she said cheerfully. “I’ve got a poundcake in the oven.” As we hung up, she was logging on to a virtual meeting to discuss the new school year; in addition to running Good IV the Soul, her Brooklyn-based catering company, she teaches culinary arts in New York City public high schools. After the meeting, she would finish preparing a dinner that she was catering that night, setting portions aside for me to try in advance of her next venture: launching the third pop-up (through Aug. 16) in an ongoing series at Maison Yaki, in Prospect Heights, showcasing Black entrepreneurs.

The dinner included strip steak topped with parsley compound butter, salmon stuffed with lump crabmeat, and roasted broccoli, all hearty, comforting, and abundantly seasoned, fragrant with a concentrated, garlicky saltiness. Williams’s mother is her primary culinary inspiration, she told me, as well as her best friend. A retired bus matron who used to

get up at 4 A.M. to commute from Brooklyn to the Bronx, her mother “always made sure she had food on the table,” Williams said. “A protein, a starch, and a veggie.” Good IV the Soul’s repertoire is loosely organized around traditions of the American South and the Caribbean and miscellaneous in the manner of someone game to take requests. The menu for the pop-up includes not one but three preparations of shrimp: deep fried; smothered, atop grits; and mixed with cheese in an empanada-like “soul pocket.”

Williams has long dreamed of opening a restaurant, or, better yet, six. May she follow in the footsteps of Lani Halliday, the first chef to be featured at Maison Yaki, in July, whose five-year-old cake-and-pastry company, Brutus Bakeshop, is going brick and mortar later this year. I can think of nothing I’ve eaten recently that has buoyed my spirits more than Halliday’s passion-fruit-glazed, guava-filled pop tart, and of no confection I’ve tried, ever, that’s more complex than her miso-chocolate-chip cookie, which is as funky as an unfiltered wine.

Both are gluten-free and vegan, designations that, in Halliday’s hands, seem less like restrictions than like powerfully wielded creative constraints. Her dark-chocolate cake, made with aquafaba and a rice-based flour mix, has an exceptionally soft and glossy crumb. The leaves of raw collard greens that she wrapped, burrito style, around sliced heirloom tomato and sautéed mushrooms struck me not as a substitute for something starchier but as the best possible option,

sturdy yet supple. In the U.S., collards are associated with the South; Halliday grew up in Hawaii and Portland, Oregon, but much of her family is from Alabama, where her uncle grows vegetables, including collards. “Systemic racism has sort of strangled my connection to my lineage,” she told me. The wraps were a way to acknowledge her heritage on her own terms.

As Jared Howard developed the menu for Honey Bunny’s Chicken, the second pop-up in the series, he considered the optics of “being an African-American serving fried chicken,” he told me. “I did not want to be a cliché.” But he did want to highlight the cuisine of his native Maryland, which he began researching years ago. As expected, there was much to learn about Chesapeake Bay seafood; what surprised him was the chicken. Some of his mother’s techniques, he realized—like covering her cast-iron pan with a lid mid-fry, which retains moisture—seemed Maryland specific. In Escoffier’s “Ma Cuisine,” published in 1934, Howard found a recipe for Maryland fried chicken finished with béchamel, and another source suggested that a dish of the same name had been served on the Titanic. At Maison Yaki, he dusted his in Old Bay and sandwiched it—with béchamel—in an herb-flecked, Red Lobster-inspired buttermilk biscuit. There were no crab cakes, but a clever oyster-mushroom po’boy hinted at the sea, and at what more Howard has in store. (Pop-up dishes \$7–\$30.)

—Hannah Goldfield



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT FAILING SCHOOLS

School isn't due to start in New York City until after Labor Day, but in Georgia some districts began opening last week, even though the state is averaging upward of three thousand new cases of COVID-19 a day—more than France, Germany, and the United Kingdom combined. Schools opened in Paulding County, outside Atlanta, despite there being an outbreak among members of a high-school football team. Students posted photographs of the first days of the term at the high school, showing teen-agers jammed in two-way corridor traffic, most of them without masks. Brian Otott, the county's school superintendent, said that the crowding did not violate its "protocols" and that "wearing a mask is a personal choice and there is no practical way to enforce a mandate to wear them." School administrators did, however, warn students that they would be disciplined if they kept posting "negative" images.

Otott's statement exhibited defiance, denialism, and a peculiar sort of defeatism—all factors that have contributed to what it is now clear are woefully inadequate preparations to open schools nationwide. In May, as the number of new cases in much of the country was declining, it might have been possible to believe that, by the fall, it would be high time and easy, as President Trump tweeted, to "OPEN THE SCHOOLS!!!" Indeed, many people who care deeply about vulnerable populations in ways that he has never shown are desperate

to open schools. Children can be less safe at home than they are at school; families can face a crisis if a parent or guardian (often a mother) has to stay with a child rather than go to work.

But as Lori Lightfoot, the mayor of Chicago, put it last week, when she announced that all school instruction in her city will be remote at least until November, we have now moved to "a very different place in the arc of the pandemic." Los Angeles, San Diego, Miami-Dade, Philadelphia, and Houston made similar decisions. In some places, sufficient groundwork simply hasn't been done. In New York City, which has more than a million students, the virus has ebbed, but Mayor Bill de Blasio has offered an inept plan that relies on staff and equipment that don't exist and that the city has no plans to pay for, all to give children in-person instruction only one to three days a week. Michael Mul-

grew, the head of the United Federation of Teachers, has said that the city's safety standards are "not enough."

It remains true, thankfully, that the number of children who die from COVID-19 is very small, but they can become quite ill and have high viral loads. (A video of Trump claiming, last week, that children were "almost immune" was taken down by Facebook for violating its policy on dangerous COVID-19 misinformation.) And children, particularly older ones, can spread the virus; in Israel, the reopening of middle schools and high schools with relaxed social distancing preceded outbreaks in the wider community. A study by the Centers for Disease Control of a summer camp in Georgia found at least two hundred and sixty confirmed cases among the some six hundred children and staff members; half the children aged six to ten tested positive, the highest rate of any age group present. Staff had been required to wear masks; campers were not.

The focus on teachers' safety, and the stand taken by their unions, has provoked some anger—this is, after all, a country willing to mandate that a teacher endanger her life but not that a teenager wear a mask. The most thoughtless voices, exemplified by a *Wall Street Journal* editorial last week entitled "School-Opening Extortion," dismiss teachers' fears and accuse them of being little more than pandemic shakedown artists looking to "squeeze more money from taxpayers." Others argue that teachers are "essential workers," and need to take the risks that come with the job, just as health-care or transit or food-industry





workers do. But essential workers have every right to insist that sensible measures be taken for their safety. Teachers, because their unions are organized and politically influential, can stand up for themselves in a way that immigrant meat-packing workers cannot; in a sense, that power confers an obligation to speak out and set standards for what any worker in this long pandemic deserves.

Where does all this leave children, parents, and employers? Some families are forming at-home “pod schools” with friends; others are turning to private schools. The public-policy challenge is what will happen to students whose families do not have such resources. California is exploring a kind of triage, in which some elementary schools open, and older students stay home; there are inventive proposals, such as holding classes outdoors, but that still requires space, staffing, and funding. As grim as it is to say, though, the most practical thing that dis-

tricts can do may be to improve remote learning, which will be part of the equation in all scenarios.

This spring, “remote instruction” was often a euphemism for “no instruction.” For some children, it involved little more than intermittently watching a screen. Others didn’t even have a screen to watch; in Los Angeles alone, a quarter of a million households with school-age children lacked a computer with broadband. Even if a home has a digital device, it may be shared by more than one student and by parents working remotely. Attempts to insure that students have what they need to learn have been patchy; as with so many things related to the pandemic, the money isn’t there. Many school systems, including New York City’s, have had their budgets cut. Democrats in Congress have proposed more than four hundred billion dollars in aid to public schools as part of the second pandemic relief bill, while Republicans

have sought only a fraction of that.

If there is to be any hope for in-person schooling not only in the fall but in the spring—when a safe vaccine, even if one exists, might not be fully available—a rapid change in course is necessary. This might include targeted lockdowns, or trading closed restaurants and shops for open schools. It certainly demands a greater financial, political, and community commitment. Several countries, such as Germany and South Korea, have done the work both to beat back the virus and to allow schools to reopen in a reasonably safe manner, with measures such as mandatory masks, small classes, broad testing, and strict distancing.

The United States accomplished neither; as a nation, we wasted the summer, while Trump sowed distrust and promoted heedlessness. What’s left now is to see what can be salvaged. We’re already late for school.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

## LOCAL HEROES TRUMP AND SON



Christopher Columbus was tossed into a lake in Richmond, Virginia. King Leopold II, of Belgium, was burned and hauled off by a crane. When activists came for Fred Trump, the late father of the sitting U.S. President, they brought a five-gallon can of paint, a paint roller, and a blowtorch. The monument that they were targeting—before officers responding to a 911 call foiled their operation—did not include a plinth. It was a modest metal plaque on a pole, rising over a pen of shopping carts in the parking lot of a small grocery on Jamaica Avenue, in Woodhaven, Queens.

What stands out about the incident is, as a police report notes, the location’s “historical connection with the current President of the United States of America.” Also, one of the alleged vandals is associated with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the representative for parts of Queens and the Bronx.

The four perpetrators entered the parking lot, under the elevated tracks of

the J train, at around 1:20 A.M. on June 20th. According to the police report, they tried to tamper with surveillance cameras on the store’s awning before getting down to business. The square of metal that they came to do battle with, painted in the blue-and-yellow color scheme of a New York State license plate, read,

FRED CHRIST TRUMP  
BORN IN WOODHAVEN OCT. 11, 1905  
BEGAN BUILDING AT AGE 15, BUILT  
THIS STORE FOUNDED E. TRUMP  
& SON NOW TRUMP ORGANIZATION  
FATHER OF “THE DONALD”

When police arrived at the scene, Officer Bryan Hagmaier arrested Justine Medina, a former chair of the Queens Democratic Socialists of America; her three accomplices, described as two men wearing black clothing and a mysterious third person, presumably got away.

The next morning, the historical marker was gone, and for local residents there were many unanswered questions: Had the plaque been defaced? Would it be returned to its spot over the shopping carts? Did people in Woodhaven even want a commemoration of Fred Trump? Why hadn’t the vandals used spray paint?

Edward Wendell is the president of the Woodhaven Cultural and Histori-

cal Society, which the police report lists as one of two victims. (The other is the grocery store.) Wendell’s organization erected the plaque in 1999, when Fred Trump died. (Seven blocks away, on Eighty-eighth Street, a similar marker notes the birthplace of Mae West.) Wendell, a gregarious, bearded man of imposing size who works as an I.T. director, did not want to discuss the state of the plaque; he was dealing with a wasp problem in his front yard. “The only thing I will publicly say is that the sign is down, and that we will discuss it at the next Historical Society meeting,” he said. He later added, “We have no plans to put the sign back in place.”

Fred Trump built the grocery store during the Depression, when the real-estate market was sagging. The Woodhaven that he lived in, a century ago, was a remote byway. (An ad from the period, for a Trump development in nearby Hollis, boasted such amenities as “sewers, concrete street and sidewalks.”) It also was overwhelmingly white. Joel Kuszai, a professor of English at Queensborough Community College, is writing a book about the Ku Klux Klan’s influence in Queens during the nineteen-twenties. It includes a chapter that describes the President’s father, who attended a Klan rally that



began on Jamaica Avenue, in 1927. “It doesn’t matter whether Fred Trump was a dues-paying member of the Klan,” Kuszai said. “He was situated within a community in which there were thousands of Klan members.”

Woodhaven has changed since then. People of color make up eighty per cent of the population, and only twenty per cent of residents voted for Donald Trump in 2016. Still, affection for the Trump family persists among some locals. Tony Rinaldi, the owner of Hardware City, a store down the street from where the historical marker stood, said that Trump had a good bit of support among his customers. “A lot of people are upset by the things that are going on in this country,” he explained, without elaborating.

The District Attorney charged Medina with attempted criminal mischief. (The case is pending, with a court date set for October.) Medina, a self-described activist, lives in Ridgewood, not far from Woodhaven. Petite, with cropped blond hair and a nose ring, she answered her door the other day but didn’t have much to say about her arrest. “It makes me a little nervous, because I work for A.O.C.,” she said, and excused herself to return to a conference call. (Ocasio-Cortez did not respond to a request for comment, but financial disclosures show that Medina was on her campaign’s payroll.)

As for Medina’s methods, Hardware City’s Rinaldi didn’t think much of them. “A blowtorch?” he said, suggesting that a reciprocating saw would have been better. “If you had a good blade, it would take one or two minutes to saw down a pole like that.”

—Phil Campbell

## DEPT. OF PREVENTION MIGHTY MICE



Imagine, for a moment, a time when the coronavirus is eradicated. There are therapies and a vaccine. Lives are spared. People will ask, How did we get here? The answer may turn on a decision, made early this year, to send sixteen vials of mouse sperm to Mount Desert Island, Maine. Much of the is-

land is a national park, with granite peaks and rocky beaches. Tucked into the landscape is the Jackson Laboratory, a non-profit founded, in 1929, to conduct biomedical research. It is the largest distributor of genetically engineered laboratory mice in the country, with a mouse repository that contains more than eleven thousand specimens.

On February 3rd, COVID-19 was not yet officially a pandemic. There were three hundred and sixty-two reported deaths—all but one of them in China—when Cat Lutz, the director of the mouse repository, got an e-mail from a colleague who works at another Jackson facility, in Shanghai, and lives in Wuhan, the outbreak’s epicenter. When the authorities locked down his city, he was stuck at home. “It was just terrifying,” Lutz recalled. “He said, ‘I am thinking about what we can do.’ He had started combing through the literature.”

Both scientists knew that the novel coronavirus would not make a conventional lab mouse ill—a severe obstacle to the development of a treatment. The medical community needed a mouse that was genetically modified with a human feature added to its lung cells, so that the virus would affect it. Years earlier, three American research teams had engineered such a mouse in response to SARS. One of the teams, co-led by Stanley Perlman, a virologist at the University of Iowa, had published a paper about its animal in 2007. SARS had receded, the authors noted, but the need to study coronaviruses had not. “It still remains a potential threat,” they warned.

“That day, we called Stan Perlman to see if he would donate his mice, and he said yes,” Lutz recalled. Those animals were no longer living, but Perlman’s team had frozen their sperm. Two vials arrived within days, followed by fourteen more. “We basically decided to use every last drop,” Lutz said. At Jackson, the sperm was rushed to a “dirty room,” where it was washed of potential contaminants. Then, using I.V.F., the laboratory began the process of generating twelve hundred transgenic mouse pups.

With each passing week, the coronavirus crisis became more acute. Lutz’s daughter fled Manhattan for Maine. As cities shut down, Jackson technicians were not only racing to produce mice for COVID-19—they were also swamped

with requests to cryopreserve genetically modified mice used to study other diseases. Universities were shuttering labs whose work was not related to the pandemic, and research animals were poised to die by the thousands.

“We sent trucks around the country,” Lutz said. She was standing in Jackson’s cryopreservation room, beside twelve large steel vats. As she looked into one of the open containers, cold mist floated



upward from inside it. “It’s like a Halloween lab, because there is a lot of liquid nitrogen,” she said. A technician was extracting vials of sperm from the vat. “She is wearing a lot of protective gear, because liquid nitrogen can burn you,” Lutz explained. “She is going to transfer those into this larger vat.”

Lutz headed to an office where a computer displayed a video feed of a breeding room—a super-secure sterile environment with racks of mouse cages and an “air shower,” to wash particles from clothing before entry. After the twelve hundred I.V.F. mouse pups were created, they were bred to produce more, with the expectation that demand would be enormous. Mice reproduce quickly, but the months required to build up a large enough colony were agonizing, as scientists barraged Lutz with impatient pleas. “People were calling, saying, ‘I knew your father, I knew your brother, we went to graduate school together, don’t you remember me?’” she recalled. “They would pull out any relationship.”

By mid-June, Lutz was finally ready to ship. Trucks were leaving Mount Desert Island every week, and travelling to



medical researchers around the world. She stopped at a loading dock to oversee a shipment for Boston. Technicians in protective gear were standing at a conveyor belt, ferrying rows of semi-opaque plastic boxes—each housing mice designed for COVID-19—out of the building. They were transferring them into an eighteen-wheeler. As they worked, it was possible to see outlines of the mice scurrying around inside. Lutz headed out, and the truck departed. “We all recognize the sacrifice of these animals,” she said. “If you work here long enough, you develop a sense of gratitude.”

—*Raffi Khatchadourian*

## SIDE GIG

### AMERICA'S LANDLORD



It was a three-story yellow clapboard house in Park Slope, with blue French doors and southern exposures. There were three bedrooms—easily convertible to four—and amenities such as a dishwasher and a soaker hose for the back garden (herbs, rose of Sharon, a dwarf crab-apple tree). The rent was reasonable: four thousand nine hundred and fifty dollars a month. And it was only a five-minute walk to the Prospect Park Y.M.C.A.

“It felt like a bit of a fixer-upper,” Julian Hornik, a twenty-five-year-old theatre composer, said. “But it was a whole house, and it was in our price range. We could clean it up and make it lovely.” Hornik and his roommates—Lauren Modiano, who also works in theatre, and Spencer Bokats-Lindell, an editor at the *Times*—were looking to move out of their six-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot apartment in the neighborhood. “There’s an upright piano in our living room that Julian uses for work,” Bokats-Lindell explained. “When both Lauren and I were working in offices, this wasn’t an issue. But, now that we’re all confined to the same workspace, it’s not really tenable, because my room, like, abuts the piano.”

When they saw the listing on Street-Easy for the yellow house, which had three times more space than their cur-

rent place, Hornik e-mailed the broker, Trisha Webster, a former body-parts model. (Her hands have been used as stand-ins for Farrah Fawcett’s.) When Webster called, she had a lot of questions. “She asked, ‘Why are you moving?’” Hornik said. “‘Who are you moving with? How do you know your roommates? How long have you lived together? What do you do? How much do you make?’” She told him that he and his friends seemed like “decent candidates” for the house and offered to show it to them if they all signed non-disclosure agreements.

“Do you know who the landlord is?” she asked. They did not. She said, “Well, it’s the Mayor.”

“As soon as I found that out, I was like, O.K., I don’t think this is going to work,” Bokats-Lindell said. He contacted the standards editor at the *Times* and asked, “What is the policy about renting an apartment from the Mayor?” (The gist of the response: If you can avoid taking the place, that’d be great.)

Bill de Blasio bought the yellow house on Eleventh Street in 2000, for four hundred and fifty thousand dollars. (It’s now worth more than \$1.5 million.) It was his family’s primary residence before they moved into Gracie Mansion, in 2014. It is not the only property that de Blasio rents out; he also owns a two-family house, down the block, where his late mother lived, and where he now has two sets of tenants. The upstairs one-bedroom unit (dressing alcove, subway-tiled bathroom) goes for eighteen hundred and twenty-five dollars a month, and the ground-floor apartment (E.I.K., three ceiling fans, no pets) goes for two thousand nine hundred and fifty. Webster was the rental agent for both.

Bokats-Lindell was surprised to hear that the Mayor had a side gig as a landlord. The notion of signing an N.D.A. just to look at the place made him uneasy. He wondered, he said, if there was also “going to be a clause in the lease saying that you can’t talk about your landlord.” But his roommates were excited about the house—the back yard!—so they submitted their paperwork to Webster, planning to sign the confidentiality agreement in person.

The next morning, Webster sent them an e-mail. “I’ve spoken to the Landlord about your inquiry to see the house,” she



*Bill de Blasio*

wrote. “Your combined income would need a guarantor and they said they are not comfortable with that rental situation.” The friends were puzzled: their combined incomes were more than forty times the monthly rent, a typical threshold for New York City landlords. Hornik, looking through public records, found that de Blasio’s pre-mayoral salary was comparable to what he and his roommates earned. On the other hand, the lease was for only one year: de Blasio will be out of office by the end of 2021, and even though he and his wife are empty nesters, perhaps they will move back into the yellow house.

The roommates found another place in Park Slope. It’s about the same square footage as de Blasio’s house, but there’s no back yard. It’s above Haenyeo, one of their favorite restaurants. The landlord is a lady named Janice. “As far as I know, she’s a normal person,” Bokats-Lindell said. “She’s at least not the mayor.”

—*Tyler Foggatt*

## U.K. POSTCARD

### ROOMS WITH A VIEW



“The house wants doing up—and the wallpapers are awful,” Virginia Woolf wrote to her sister, Vanessa Bell, during the midst of the First World War, about a farmhouse



called Charleston, in Sussex. The bathwater was cold, and the tenants had given animals the run of the rooms, but the garden was charming—"a pond, and fruit trees, and vegetables"—and Bell moved her household there in 1916. She brought her lover, Duncan Grant, his lover David Garnett, and her two children by her husband, Clive, who was waiting out the war elsewhere. (Complicated but harmonious.) The farmwork enabled the men, both conscientious objectors, to avoid conscription, and the house offered the family an idyllic, secluded retreat from the outside world, not unlike the one imagined by Woolf for her character Orlando, who "naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone."

One benefit of idyllic retreats is privacy; another is freedom in décor. Bell and Grant, both artists, treated Charleston like a canvas, painting the walls, the furniture, the doorways: a God of Sleep bed frame and a Ballet Russes log box. They painted their visitors, too, among them Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, and John Maynard Keynes, who had his own bedroom. In the garden, they had zinnias and narcissus, sweet peas and dahlias, a tiled pond and a piazza. For decades, Charleston served as a Bloomsbury watering hole. Then its occupants gradually died off, and it fell into decline. In 1980, a trust was established, and the house was restored; it hosted paying visitors and an annual literary festival, which this year would have featured Gloria Steinem and Salman Rushdie.

"That's all gone down the tubes, and we are seriously worried," Virginia Nicholson, the president of the Charleston Trust and Bell's granddaughter, said recently. A truncated version of the festival ("Charleston at Home") took place online, but the house remains closed because of the pandemic. This is a problem. Charleston is self-funded: its income comes from foot traffic (banned), the festival (cancelled), and gift-shop sales (online only). In March, the trust launched an emergency appeal for donations. Emily Maude, an artist in Brighton, ran an Instagram auction, which raised about fifty-five thousand pounds. Fans pitched



*"Seagulls aren't about food anymore—now they want experiences."*

in, too, selling hand-painted tables, special-edition books, and a selection of fountain-pen inks. The gardener at Charleston sold bunches of flowers outside an antique shop. "We are obviously at risk of permanent closure," Nicholson said.

The other day, Nicholson, who is also an author and a historian, had a Zoom call with her younger sister, the designer Cressida Bell, about Charleston's future. Their father, the art historian Quentin Bell, who grew up at Charleston, had been instrumental in saving the house the last time it was in trouble. Nicholson, in a poppy-red cardigan, was calling from her study, in Sussex, surrounded by books and a bust of her grandmother. Cressida was in her studio, in East London's Hackney neighborhood, painting the base of a table lamp. (Her work includes lamps, textiles, stationery, and scarves, and she runs a popular lampshade-painting workshop, now postponed.) Both women have short blond bobs, glasses, and elegant, angular faces.

They compared memories of the house, where they spent summers and weekends as children. Nicholson was only five years old when Vanessa died (Cressida was one), but she remembers being painted by her grandmother at Charleston. "They paid six pence an hour," she said, of modelling. "I loved the studio best, because it was the only warm room in the house."

"I loved the dining room," Cressida said.

"I love the fact that the walls are black, almost charcoal," Vanessa would always sit at the same place at the wide, circular table, which was painted with rings of pastel yellow, pink, and green. The plates, painted by Vanessa and Grant, were all different, and the children fought over them. (Cressida loved an orange-and-turquoise one.)

On Saturdays, Cressida would visit the house to make pottery with her father and spend time with Grant, whom they regarded as a beloved grandfather. "He had this wonderful slew of gay admirers," Cressida recalled. "It never struck any of us that it was odd or peculiar that we had, on that side of the family, three grandparents instead of the usual two," Nicholson added.

When the sisters stayed overnight, they braved the baths (scalding hot and scummy), and the camp beds in the attic, where they slept. "The attic wasn't very luxurious, but it was full of very exciting things," Nicholson said. A doll's house, a dress-up closet, an old typewriter.

"The butterfly chest!" Cressida said. She had almost finished the lamp, an order for a customer in Texas. She held up its matching shade: blue-green with a leafy pattern.

Nicholson was feeling nostalgic. "Charleston still smells the same to me. It smells like turpentine and old books," she said. "You can feel the ghosts."

—Anna Russell



LETTER FROM WISCONSIN

# THE LAST STAND

*How suffering farmers may determine Trump's fate.*

BY DAN KAUFMAN



Last October, Jerry Volenec, a dairy farmer from southwestern Wisconsin, took the morning off to go to Madison for the World Dairy Expo, an annual cattle-judging contest and trade show. Volenec wanted to hear a town-hall discussion led by Sonny Perdue, Donald Trump's Secretary of Agriculture, to learn how the Administration planned to address the economic crisis gripping Wisconsin's family dairy farmers.

Volenec's farm sits atop Bohemian Ridge, a jagged plateau named for the Czech immigrants who settled there in the late nineteenth century. Among them was Joseph Volenec, Jerry's great-great-grandfather, who established the farm, in

1897. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, Volenec's grandfather milked a herd of sixteen cows; he could make a living because New Deal policies used price supports and other measures to boost farmers' earnings and limit overproduction.

Jerry Volenec always wanted to become a farmer. "You couldn't keep me out of the barn," he said. "I was milking cows by myself by the time I was fourteen." By the early nineties, when Volenec began farming full time, the New Deal policies had largely been dismantled. The family increased its herd to about seventy, and Volenec's father started paying him a salary, enough money for his education at the Univer-

sity of Wisconsin-Platteville, and to start an I.R.A. In 2000, Volenec installed a milking parlor, and since then he has increased the herd to three hundred and thirty cows. "We're the biggest of the small guys," Volenec, who is forty-five, with a sturdy build and a thin goatee, said. "But I was making more money, doing less work, when I started, twenty-five years ago. I'm basically paying myself living expenses now."

Five years ago, the price of milk fell precipitously, accelerating the long unravelling of rural Wisconsin. Since 2010, the population in two-thirds of the state's rural counties has decreased, leading to a shrinking workforce, fewer jobs and businesses, and slower income growth rates than in metro counties. More than seventy rural schools have closed, and for the past three years the state has led the country in family-farm bankruptcies. "The level of desperation and lack of hope in our phone calls has increased," Angie Sullivan, who supervises caseworkers at the Wisconsin Farm Center, part of the state's Department of Agriculture, said. "Dairy farmers are working on their fifth year of low milk prices. Many banks have stopped loaning them money." Wisconsin has seven thousand dairy farms, roughly half the number that it had a decade ago. Yet the number of cows has remained constant, because of consolidation and the proliferation of factory dairy farms, some of which have herds of more than five thousand cows.

"It's like a never-ending cycle, almost like a hamster on the wheel," Travis Tranel, a Republican state representative from Cuba City, forty miles south of Volenec's farm, told me. Tranel is an organic dairy farmer with a five-hundred-cow herd. "You just keep running and running. Your only option is to produce more." Tranel said that consolidation has all but wiped out small dairy farms in Wisconsin and now threatens medium-sized farms such as his. "We can see the future if we stay on the path we're on," he said, noting that the consolidation of hog farming had already transformed Iowa. "I definitely do not want to see rural Wisconsin become as empty as rural Iowa."

After the town hall, Perdue took questions from reporters, one of whom asked if the state's loss of small farms was in-

*In the past decade, about half of the state's dairy farms have gone out of business.*



evitable. “In America, the big get bigger, and the small will go out,” Perdue said. “I don’t think in America for any small business we have a guaranteed income or guaranteed profitability.” Volenec wasn’t surprised by Perdue’s answer. “I walked in there knowing that’s how they felt,” Volenec told me, referring to the Trump Administration. “The part that was unnerving to me was that he said it to our faces. They’re not trying to hide it anymore. They’re telling us flat out: You’re not important.”

In 2016, after voting for Barack Obama twice, Volenec voted for Trump. Volenec had grown disenchanted with Obama after his Administration banned whole milk from schools and did little to slow the loss of family farms. “I wasn’t following politics closely,” he said. “I never listened to Trump give a speech, just commentary over the radio. I had the general impression that what’s wrong with the agricultural economy was that too many politicians were involved, and that having a businessman in the White House would benefit me.”

As rural Wisconsin’s fortunes have declined, its political importance has grown. Trump won the state by less than twenty-three thousand votes. If the 2020 election is close, Trump could lose Michigan and Pennsylvania—the other Rust Belt states he flipped in 2016—and still win a second term by holding Wisconsin. Trump underperformed in the suburban counties of Milwaukee, the Republican Party’s stronghold, while overperforming in the state’s rural areas, where he won nearly two-thirds of the vote. The Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* found that the largest shift in voting between Obama’s seven-point victory in Wisconsin, in 2012, and Trump’s one-point win came in communities that cast fewer than a thousand votes. (Nationally, Trump won sixty-two per cent of the rural vote.)

Four years ago, Trump promised to reverse the economic decline of family farmers. “Hillary Clinton wants to shut down family farms just like she wants to shut down the mines and the steelworkers,” he said, during a campaign stop at the Iowa State Fairgrounds. “We are going to end this war on the American farmer.” In early 2018, he launched a series of trade wars, which provoked China, Mexico, Canada, and the European Union into

imposing penalties on American dairy products. Mexico, the largest importer of Wisconsin cheese, levied a twenty-five-per-cent tariff on American cheeses. Last summer, Trump allotted fifteen billion dollars in compensation to farmers, but the vast majority of it has gone to the largest farms. In a tweet, he called farmers “great patriots” and promised that they would eventually be better off.

In June, as Trump’s poll numbers dropped nationwide, the Washington *Post* reported that his campaign advisers were losing hope for Michigan and Pennsylvania, and would focus on holding Wisconsin. “It’s baked into the cake that Trump will lose the state’s large metro areas in a landslide, while the suburbs have been fleeing him,” Ben Wikler, the head of the Wisconsin Democratic Party, told me. “Trump can’t win a second term unless he racks up enormous margins in rural Wisconsin.”

For Volenec, Trump’s appeal vanished almost immediately. “If I had known the things I know about him now, I wouldn’t have voted for him,” he said, when I visited him at his farm in February. As Trump’s trade wars escalated, Volenec’s problems worsened. In March, 2018, Canada effectively cut off all dairy imports from the United States, and milk from Michigan that had previously been exported began flooding into Wisconsin’s processing plants. The co-op where Volenec sent his milk for processing was now competing with cheap out-of-state milk, and put a cap on the amount that it would take from him. That week, Volenec heard about a meeting of the Wisconsin Farmers Union, a family-farm advocacy group, in nearby Dodgeville, to promote a version of supply management, a system used in Canada that sets a quota on the production of dairy, eggs, and poultry. Designed, like the New Deal policies, to prevent overproduction and to guarantee farmers a stable income, the system relies on higher prices for Canadian consumers. Trump’s trade war with Canada is aimed at dismantling supply management, which has long been deplored by Republican politicians. John Boehner, the former Speaker of the House, called it “Soviet-style” agriculture. For Volenec, it was a revelation. “This was my first glimpse into a world where the dairy farmer is not subservi-

ent to The Market,” he wrote in an essay called “Groomed for Apocalypse.”

Volenec lives on the farm with his wife, Jennifer, and their four daughters. His parents still live and work there, too, and the family employs four farmhands, Mexican immigrants who milk the cows three times a day, in five-hour shifts. Volenec spends most of his time feeding cattle and doing maintenance. His workday begins at five in the morning and, in the spring and summer, ends at nine or ten at night. It was bitterly cold the day I visited, so Volenec led me into a small office adjacent to the milking parlor. On the wall was a whiteboard with numbers detailing the farm’s milk production, which averages roughly thirty thousand pounds a day. A truck picks up the milk every day and takes it to the co-op, where it is turned into cheese. (Ninety per cent of Wisconsin’s milk is used to make cheese; if the state were a country, it would be the fourth-largest cheese-producing nation in the world.)

Dairy farmers have felt the effects of the coronavirus pandemic acutely. As schools and restaurants closed, they abruptly cancelled their contracts with milk bottlers and cheese factories. The price of milk dropped by more than thirty per cent, and some processors began asking their farmers to dump milk. By late April, as hungry people lined up at food banks, one farm had already dumped more than five million pounds of milk, according to “The Mid-West Farm Report.” Mitch Breunig, a dairy farmer in Sauk City, had to dump all of his morning milking for ten days. “We took a hundred-and-fifty-foot hose and ran it from the milking parlor right into the manure-storage unit in the barn,” he told me. Breunig wound up dumping eighty thousand pounds of milk, for which he received no money. “I would just look at it and think, Wow, everything we did was for nothing.”

State agencies issued protocols for dumping milk, which can pollute groundwater and decimate fish populations. Though Volenec has not had to dump any of his milk, he’s been worrying about the environmental costs of large-scale dairy farming, from water contamination to climate change. Manure runoff from industrial dairy farming has contributed to a dramatic increase in bacteria and nitrates in the state’s groundwater,



according to a study funded in part by Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources. (A farm with twenty-five hundred cows produces as much waste as a city of four hundred thousand people.) The E.P.A. recently sampled the groundwater in a thirty-mile area of Juneau County that's dense with dairy cows and found that sixty-five per cent of the sites had elevated levels of nitrates, which have been linked to birth defects, colon cancer, and "blue-baby syndrome," a condition that reduces oxygen in an infant's blood and can be fatal.

"You're now looking at three or four generations of depletion," Curt Meine, an environmental historian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told me. "Depletion of rural communities, rural landscapes, rural soils and water, depletion of the land and local economies. And you have the brain drain that followed it. This is why we have this deep urban-rural divide. We have concentrated and exported the wealth. Everyone sees it, but neither party has wrestled with it. One party exploited it, the other party has ignored it."

"It's hard, because I've built my life around a system that I believe now is extremely problematic from an environmental, social, even a personal level," Volenec said. "It's not the farming that I was brought up with. It's not really even farming anymore. It's mining. We're extracting resources and shipping them away, and they're not coming back. There's no cyclical nature to it. It's a straight line out."

Volenec and I walked across the road to see his great-great-grandfather's homestead. The land begins behind his house. Rolling fields stretched to the horizon, punctuated by cornstalks and a few trees. Volenec told me that he will be the family's last farmer. "I don't want my kids doing what I'm doing," he said. He gazed at the snow-covered plot. "The flip side for me is: Is what I've done worth anything?"

Volenec's farm is in the Driftless Area, a vast region of hills and valleys in southern and western Wisconsin whose agricultural and political histories are deeply entwined. The Driftless Area, with its steep coulees and sandstone bluffs, is a geological anomaly in the Midwest. (It also encompasses smaller portions of Iowa,

Minnesota, and Illinois.) As rural America trended Republican, it remained one of the few rural regions that still tended to vote Democratic. The Driftless Area was where Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife ecology and a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, worked on soil- and watershed-restoration projects. In 1945, when Wisconsin had about a hundred and fifty thousand dairy farms, Leopold wrote an essay called "The Outlook for Farm Wildlife," which warned of the dangers of industrialized agriculture for soil, animals, and rural communities. Leopold saw two possibilities for American agriculture: the farm as a "place-to-live," where wildlife could be accommodated, or the farm as a "food-factory," whose only goal is to produce sellable goods. The latter, he believed, generated "new insecurities, economic and ecological, in place of those it was meant to abolish."

After the Second World War, American agriculture moved toward Leopold's darker possibility. Companies such as Dow Chemical and DuPont began repurposing wartime technology and materials for agricultural uses. Nitrogen, an essential element in TNT and other explosives, was used to make fertilizers that can vastly improve yields. Such fertilizers soon became widespread, leading to the Green Revolution, which brought an enormous increase in agricultural production in the developing world. It helped reduce hunger, but also diminished biodiversity and left lasting environmental damage—depleting the soil, increasing greenhouse-gas emissions, and contaminating water supplies. In the U.S., synthetic fertilizers were essential to what's known as the "cheap food policy," in which the U.S.D.A. pursues ever-higher yields to keep food prices low for consumers, at the expense of farmers' wages and the environment.

Decades before Sonny Perdue, Earl Butz, the Secretary of Agriculture under Richard Nixon, urged American farmers to "get big or get out." Butz called farming "a big business," and told farm audiences that they needed to "adapt or die." In the summer of 1972, after experiencing crop failure, the Soviet Union bought eleven million tons of American grain. The sale wiped out American grain reserves, helped create a worldwide food shortage, and contributed to a rise in

global food prices of more than thirty per cent. Butz implored farmers to plant "fencerow to fencerow," promising them limitless exports. New Deal policies had encouraged soil-conservation measures, but Butz's export-driven focus led to monoculture farming, which transformed much of the rural Midwest into endless fields of corn and soybeans. Agricultural exports became an instrument of foreign policy. "Food is a weapon," Butz told *Time* in 1974, as a wave of famines spread around the world. "It is now one of the principal tools in our negotiating kit."

In the early eighties, however, a grain embargo against the Soviet Union, a strong dollar, and a global economic recession caused exports to dry up. Many farmers, who had borrowed heavily to expand, were foreclosed on. The signing of NAFTA, in 1993, by Bill Clinton, promised a revival of exports but ended up hurting family farmers, encouraging consolidation with large agribusiness companies that, like their counterparts in the auto industry, started moving production to Mexico. Since NAFTA's passage, more than two hundred thousand small farms in the U.S. have gone under, and an agricultural trading surplus with Canada and Mexico has become a twelve-billion-dollar deficit.

Because the topography of the Driftless Area made large corporate farms less tenable, the region has until recently resisted many of these trends. It has one of the highest concentrations of organic farms in the country, an enduring culture of local coöperatives established by Scandinavian immigrants, and a tradition of economic populism. The partisan tilt of the Driftless Area is a major reason that Wisconsin, prior to Trump, had not voted for a Republican for President since 1984. In 2008, Obama won Wisconsin by fourteen points and carried all the Driftless Area's twenty-two counties.

Since the financial crash of 2008, however, the region's economic decline has accelerated, driving political changes that may determine the next President. In 2010, Scott Walker, a Republican, won his first term as governor, capturing almost all the Driftless Area. Before his inauguration, he began appealing to—and stoking—resentment. "We can no longer live in a society where the public employees are the haves and taxpay-



ers who foot the bills are the have-nots,” he said. Then, in February, 2011, he announced a law that gutted collective-bargaining rights for public employees and reduced their health-insurance and pension benefits. The law, which became known as Act 10, led to protests at the state capitol that at times drew a hundred thousand people.

Katherine Cramer, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, spent eight years interviewing rural Wisconsinites for her book “The Politics of Resentment,” published months before Trump’s election. “I heard so many complaints about teachers,” she told me. “How is it that they can get off of work? People who really work hard don’t have time to go out and protest.” Act 10 prompted a recall petition, which gathered more than a million signatures, but Walker won the recall election, nearly sweeping the Driftless Area. He was reelected two years later, with strong support from the region. In 2012, Walker announced a plan to increase Wisconsin’s milk production to thirty billion pounds a year by 2020. The goal was met four years early, but the increase contributed to a collapse in prices and the further consolidation of dairy farming.

Compounding the economic anxiety, a month before the 2016 Presidential election, Wisconsinites learned that their Obamacare rates would increase by an average of sixteen per cent. Rural residents were hit particularly hard, because they are less likely to have employer-sponsored health insurance. Trump seized on the underlying discontent, staging five large rallies in Wisconsin during the campaign, one of them in Eau Claire, which borders the Driftless Area. Two days before Election Day, he held a rally in Minneapolis, whose television market covers a large swath of western Wisconsin.

Hillary Clinton was the first candidate of either party not to campaign in Wisconsin since Richard Nixon in 1972. But Clinton’s negligence was not the only advantage Trump enjoyed. In 2011, Walker had signed one of the strictest voter-I.D. laws in the country, which was blocked by the courts until shortly before the 2016 election. A survey conducted by political scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison estimated that, of people in two of the state’s largest and most heavily Democratic counties who



were eligible to vote but didn’t, ten per cent had been deterred by the law. Trump also benefitted from the growth and reach of right-wing media. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that, by 2016, Wisconsin was being blanketed by conservative talk radio, averaging nearly two hundred hours a day statewide. At the same time, traditional reporting is dying. In 2000, there were twenty-one full-time reporters covering state politics. Today, there are five.

Trump won almost all the counties in the Driftless Area, but the 2018 midterms proved that Wisconsin was not yet a one-party state. Tony Evers, the state’s superintendent of schools, defeated Walker by twenty-nine thousand votes, and Democrats won every statewide office. Evers’s victory was driven by high

turnout in Milwaukee and Madison, but also by better results in rural Wisconsin, including in the Driftless Area, where he won nearly half the counties. Evers, who grew up in Plymouth, a small town an hour north of Milwaukee whose motto is “Cheese capital of the world,” campaigned heavily in farm country. “People in rural Wisconsin care about schools, health care, and good roads as much as anybody else,” Evers told me. “Wisconsin is the linchpin for both parties. If a candidate can make inroads in rural Wisconsin, they will definitely win.”

The Statz Family Farm is on the western edge of the Baraboo Hills, a dramatic outcrop that straddles the border of the Driftless Area. In 1972, when Leon Statz was twelve years old,



he moved there with his parents and seven siblings after their old farm, on Madison's west side, was swallowed up by a shopping center. The new farm sat on two hundred acres, with a white farmhouse and a stanchion barn for sixty cows. During high school, Leon apprenticed with a farmer down the road. After graduating, he enrolled in the University of Wisconsin-Madison's "short course," a four-month agricultural-training program that has been offered since 1886.

In the early eighties, Leon married Brenda Farber, and they had three children. After the middle child was born, Brenda quit her assembly-line job in nearby Reedsburg so that she could bring up the children and help on the farm. Although they worked constantly, they had little money, and Leon fell into a depression. Brenda recalls him saying, "If I fail, I'm responsible for everybody, and everybody fails."

Despite the economic hardship, Brenda remembers those years as a joyful time. "I loved raising my kids on the farm, because you get to *be* with your kids," she told me as we sat at her dining-room table. Brenda, who is fifty-seven, has long beige-blond hair, glasses, and a soft smile. "We put swings in the barn so they could be near me when I milked," she said. "They get to learn so much—my kids have seen calves being born. When my boys were little, we would

put pillows in the tractor, and they'd sleep in the tractor while I was plowing. We'd pack a lunch and eat out in the field."

In 2000, milk prices fell to a new low, and Brenda, like many people in the area, found a job at the clothing retailer Lands' End, packing orders. She woke up at four, milked the cows, and then milked them again when she returned from work. Leon milked, fed the cattle, and ran the silos. The children helped, too, when they were old enough. Most of the neighbors were going under. "From here to Reedsburg, there were probably thirty small dairy farms like ours," Brenda told me. "There are two of those still operating."

After Scott Walker was elected, Leon grew more vocal about politics. "He thought Walker was owned by big money," Brenda said. "He would get irate about everything they were cutting that was for a farmer." When Walker introduced Act 10, Leon joined protests at the state capitol. The law led to teacher pay cuts of about ten per cent, making recruitment more difficult for rural areas. Walker's cuts to state aid for local governments disproportionately hurt rural communities, which typically have smaller tax bases. At the same time, Walker's agricultural policy favored large farms: for example, much of a tax cut for manufacturers and farmers, passed in 2011, and which has already cost the state more

than a billion dollars, went to businesses making more than a million dollars a year. Walker also pushed a law to allow foreign corporations to buy more Wisconsin farmland. (The effort failed.)

In December, 2017, Brenda had a knee replacement. With Brenda unable to milk for several weeks and prices in free fall, the Statzes decided to sell their dairy cows and switch to beef, corn, and soybeans. Leon took a job as a meat cutter at a nearby Piggly Wiggly but hated it. Several weeks later, he took dozens of antidepressants and drank five beers. He left a note for Brenda: "Wish I never sold my (our) cows. I'm a dairy farmer. I miss going to the barn and seeing cows in there. Now I hate going to the barn. I hate living around the farm. I hate working for someone else. I want my old life back, but I can't get it any more. Everything I do fails. I didn't plan ahead for this, I thought everything would be fine. I wish I could turn the clock back and start over. I really screwed up. I have everything that's worth nothing. Sorry, good luck, Leon."

Brenda found Leon semiconscious, and her pastor helped persuade him to go to a hospital in Madison. He went to psychiatrists and tried different medications, but, a few months later, Ethan, his youngest child, found him in an outbuilding, tying a noose. Leon underwent eight rounds of electroconvulsive therapy. Brenda recalls him crying on the return trip from the hospital in Madison. "I want to feel better and I can't," he told her.

One weekend in October, 2018, a neighbor's land came up for sale. Leon had always dreamed of buying it for his sons, who wanted to farm. All weekend, he studied whether they could afford it, but it was impossible. "He got real quiet," Brenda said. That Sunday, she asked Leon to help her deliver some tables and chairs for their grandson's first-birthday party, but he declined. "I came back early and he was already in bed, and it wasn't that late," Brenda recalled. "He had a really hard time sleeping. He told me he wanted to talk that night, but I didn't ever want to wake him once he was asleep." Tears began pouring down her face. "Oh, I wished I would have woke him up."

The next morning, as Brenda was getting ready for work, Ethan found Leon hanging from a noose in the shed.



*"And, in one of life's cruel twists, you'll eventually be able to stay out late but you'll no longer want to."*



Brenda showed me a message he had written to her on a breeding card that she found in his wallet. "I love you," it read. "I'm concerned about your health. I'm concerned about not getting a job. I'm working where I can."

Brenda bought the neighbor's land with money from Leon's life-insurance policy. We walked to the edge of the property, which includes the shell of an old house that she hopes to tear down. Though friends had tried to dissuade her from buying the land, she never doubted her decision. "It's what he wanted," she said. "Now I got to figure out how to make this work."

On a Saturday morning in February, farmers and their supporters packed the cafeteria of Baraboo High School for a "farmer appreciation breakfast." Two dollars bought a plate of pancakes, scrambled eggs, and sausage served by high schoolers from the local chapter of Future Farmers of America. The breakfast was a benefit for the Farmer Angel Network, a support group founded by Randy Roecker, a dairy farmer from nearby Loganville, who was a friend of Leon Statz. As in many rural areas, suicides in Wisconsin have increased dramatically in recent years, reaching a record of nine hundred and eighteen in 2017. Roecker has had his own battles with depression. The problems started during the 2008 recession, shortly after he borrowed three million dollars to expand his family's fifty-cow barn into a three-hundred-cow operation with a state-of-the-art milking parlor. "I'm losing thirty thousand dollars a month, and this has been going on for years," Roecker said. To pay the banks, he keeps borrowing more, drawing on equity from his farm.

"I wanted to die every day," he recalled. "My family really watched me close. They took all the guns out of the house, of course, but I would get in the truck and take off, and I'd go and drive into the back of our fields. I was numb, numb to everything. I would get panic attacks so bad that I couldn't even go into a Walmart. I'd just sit out in the parking lot feeling sick." Roecker went to see many psychiatrists, was hospitalized several times, and received electroconvulsive therapy. "Nobody could help me, nobody," he said. "Finally, I had this vision in my head of my own fu-

neral, and my family standing there, and that's what kind of snapped me out of it. I couldn't put my family through it." Though Roecker no longer feels suicidal, he still struggles with depression.

Roecker describes himself as a "liberal conservative"—in 2008, he voted for Obama—and believes that Canadian-style supply management should be adopted in the United States. "We have a broken system," he said. "It's been that way since Earl Butz. But these bigger farms that I know don't want supply management. They say it's not the American way—free trade, free enterprise, that's the American way."

In 2008, Roecker participated in a trade mission to China for the U.S. Dairy Export Council, and he is keenly aware of the damage that Trump's tariffs have done to markets that took years to cultivate. Still, he views Trump as transformative. "I don't agree with everything he says," Roecker said. "But he's the only President who has ever tackled the trade issue." He believes that Trump's bellicose negotiating style will eventually lead to better terms for American farmers. Roecker cited the recently renegotiated NAFTA treaty, which includes a small increase in American dairy exports allowed into Canada. "Everybody else has kicked the can down the road for decades," Roecker said.

In January, Roecker's state representative offered him two tickets to a Trump rally in Milwaukee. "I was sitting in the second row behind the President," Roecker said. "It was unreal. I felt more inspired than I ever have in my life. I'm not a big patriotic, flag-waving person, but I felt very patriotic going to that. My son, too. He's twenty, and he kept saying, 'Oh, my God, Dad. Oh, my God.'"

Roecker introduced me to his family, who were sitting around a cafeteria table. His mother, father, daughter, and son-in-law all work on the farm. His parents, both in their eighties, still wake up at three-thirty every morning and work until eight at night. All of them support Trump. "He talks to us like a builder is talking to his workers," Roecker said. "I don't know what it is—I'm not brainwashed—but this is how we feel. We feel

like he is more in touch. I know what my wages are. We live below the poverty level over here. Most of the farmers I know, we're on free health care, and a lot of farmers I know are on food stamps." He looked around the table at his family. "It's all Trump supporters around here."

Conservatives have won just one of nine statewide races in Wisconsin since Trump became President. The most surprising defeat came in April, in a State Supreme Court race that turned into a national scandal. Shortly before Election Day, Governor Evers called for postponing it, owing to the coronavirus pandemic. He also asked a federal judge to extend the deadline for requesting and returning absentee ballots. Republicans sued him in the State Supreme Court, which has a conservative majority. The

justices, all of whom had voted absentee, ruled that the election must go forward. In a separate last-minute ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court decided, 5-4, that Evers could not extend the deadline for absentee ballots, even though thousands of voters had not yet received them because of delays in the U.S. mail and the flood of requests sparked by the virus. The biggest voting problems were in Milwaukee, which had just five polling places open, out of a hundred and eighty. Thousands of voters stood in hours-long lines or were turned away when polls closed. But Jill Karofsky, a liberal circuit-court judge, took fifty-five per cent of the vote, winning almost all the Driftless Area counties.

Contact tracing by Wisconsin health officials has linked seventy-one cases of COVID-19 to in-person voting. Bill Hogseth, the chairman of the Dunn County Democratic Party, worried that he would be one of them. Hogseth had worked the polls on Election Day behind a plexiglass barrier wearing a surgical mask, safety glasses, and nitrile gloves. After the election, he self-isolated for fourteen days. Despite Joe Biden's decisive win in the Democratic primary over Bernie Sanders, Hogseth is concerned about the lack of enthusiasm for Biden. "There's a deep desire for structural change," he said. "Biden's





running on a return to normalcy.” Hogseth, a Sanders supporter, noted the high number of suicides in rural Wisconsin and the empty barns he drives by. In 2016, Trump won Dunn County, which had twice gone for Obama. “The virus is laying bare just how fragile these rural communities are,” Hogseth said. “We have nine thousand people who are sixty or older, and we have zero I.C.U. beds.”

Like Hogseth, Josh Orton, a Wisconsin native and a senior Sanders campaign adviser, sees parallels between the policy records of Biden and Hillary Clinton. Orton noted that Clinton’s Wisconsin campaign had relied almost exclusively on appealing to anti-Trump sentiment. “I saw one positive Hillary ad that the campaign itself did, and it was a feel-good Katy Perry music video,” Orton said. “Every other ad was, like, ‘Trump is scary.’” In the end, Clinton received two hundred and thirty thousand fewer votes than Barack Obama had four years earlier. (Trump received several thousand fewer votes than Mitt Romney had.) “While the Supreme Court result is encouraging, I’m still concerned about November,” Orton said. “Joe Biden needs to give voters a reason to turn out besides beating Trump. He’s starting to, and I hope it continues. But will anti-Trump fervor be enough to win Wisconsin? Maybe.”

Recently, Biden began courting progressives by offering sweeping plans to aid working parents and combat climate change. (He is also making a pitch to Trump-averse conservatives by inviting the former Ohio governor John Kasich, a Republican, to speak at the Democratic Convention, which will be mostly virtual, this month.) Biden is not repeating Clinton’s mistake of taking Wisconsin for granted. Whereas Clinton did not run her first television ad in the state until a week before the election, Biden’s campaign has already aired ads in five of the state’s media markets. His campaign has hired strategists who worked on Evers’s and Senator Tammy Baldwin’s midterm victories, and he has held several virtual campaign events in Wisconsin, including one devoted to rural issues. Ben Wikler, Wisconsin’s Party chair, sees potential for a Biden victory on the scale of Obama’s in 2008. “There’s a similar sense of profound national cri-

sis,” Wikler said. “People are really hurting—people are *dying* now—and the level of engagement we’re seeing is enormous.” But Wikler also noted that Clinton had led state polls by fifteen points after the party conventions and by six points a week before the election, roughly the same margin as Biden’s current lead over Trump. Last week, in signing an executive order expanding virtual health services, Trump indicated that he would be fighting for rural voters. “We take care of rural America,” he said.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court’s decision to allow the April election to proceed may end up helping Biden. After the election, Hogseth called an emergency Zoom meeting of the Dunn County Democrats. Eighty people joined, twice the usual number, some of them Sanders supporters uninspired by Biden. “People were really frustrated and angry that the election took place,” Hogseth said. “What we decided was to make sure the election in November is not just about the Presidential race.” Hogseth believes that Karofsky’s victory reflected a decade’s worth of pent-up progressive anger at the Republican hold on state government. That anger deepened a month later, after Republican legislative leaders took Evers’s stay-at-home order to the State Supreme Court, which overturned the measure. Hogseth thinks that the growing outrage might prove to be Trump’s undoing, too. “This election is also going to be about the high-stakes struggle for power in this state,” Hogseth said. “We’re going to make sure Bernie supporters in Dunn County know that we’re fighting for Wisconsin, too.”

**O**n my way to pay a final visit to Jerry Volenec’s farm, I drove through the Driftless Area. The prairie grasses jutting through the snow, the little country churches, and the birch trees dotting the hillsides all quietly dazzled. I passed through Viroqua, near the headquarters of the Organic Valley dairy coöperative, one of the few economic bright spots in rural Wisconsin. A few miles outside of town, I saw a factory farm with several thousand cows crammed into enormous confinement barns. The stench was overwhelming.

I turned onto Volenec’s road, passing St. John Nepomuc, the Catholic church that the Volenec family has

been attending for three generations. Charles Volenec, Jerry’s father, had told me that the congregation was dwindling and that his grandson, who graduated from high school this year, was the church’s only altar boy. The road was lined with cornfields.

In his office, Jerry told me he had written a poem after Sonny Perdue’s talk in Madison. He called it a commentary on “Get big or get out”:

I was told to buy a shovel  
So I bought a shovel  
I was told to dig  
So I dug  
What is the hole for I asked  
For your neighbor, he has passed  
I was told to keep digging  
So I put my shovel to the task  
A hole for each neighbor  
Until I was the last  
Keep digging I was told  
I looked around and asked  
Who for?  
For yourself I was told  
You are needed no more.

Volenec told me that he’s grateful to Trump for his political awakening. “I may as well have been asleep before 2016,” he said. “Without Trump’s arrogance, the way he behaves, I probably wouldn’t be paying attention. Provided that he doesn’t drive this country into the ground before he’s replaced, I think he’s woken up a lot of people.”

Volenec has recently found a renewed determination to help save family farms. He has become more active with his co-op and with the Wisconsin Farmers Union. And he has begun connecting with like-minded farmers across the country. “I started out fighting for my own well-being, my own survival,” he said. “It’s evolving for me. I want to be on the right side of what’s coming next.”

His current mood reminded him of an unruly cow that once wandered off his farm. “I was on a four-wheeler and was trying to round her up,” he said. “I chased her round and round. Then she got tired of me chasing her and she stopped, turned, and she was going to fight. She was too tired to run, but she was going to use what she had left. She was challenging me—she was going to fight. I guess that’s where I’m at. I’m running my ass off, I’m tired, and I don’t have the energy to run anymore. But, by God, I’ve got enough in me to stand here and fight.” ♦



## WHO IS TO BE MASTER?

*The radical vision of Toyin Ojih Odutola.*

BY ZADIE SMITH



A woman stands in an otherworldly landscape, looking out. The landscape is sublime, though not the European sublime of cliffs, peaks, and mist. Here the sublime is African. It has many textures—conglomerations of stone, waterfalls, verdant grasslands—and may remind Nigerians of their own Jos Plateau. The woman stands with her left leg raised, surveying it all, with no sense of urgency; indeed, she appears to be in a state of philosophical contemplation. She seems assured both of her mastery over this land and of her natural right to

it. This sovereignty is expressed primarily by her body—the fabrics she wears, the pose she strikes, all of which find their reflection in the land around her. The same dark lines tracing her impressive musculature render the rippling rocks; the ridges of her bald head match the ridges in the stone; the luxurious folds of the fabric are answered by the intricate layering of the earth beneath her feet. Toyin Ojih Odutola's "The Ruling Class (Eshu)" appears, at first glance, to be a portrait of dominion. For to rule is to believe the land is made in your image, and, more-

over, that everyone within it submits to you. Structurally, it recalls Caspar David Friedrich's depiction of Enlightenment dominion, "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog": the same raised left leg, the same contemplation of power in tranquillity, the echoes of hair, pose, and fabric in the textured landscape. But the red-headed man with the cane and his back to us has been replaced by a black woman with a staff, facing forward. The script has been flipped.

The show containing this image is called "A Countervailing Theory." Countervail: to offset the effect of something by countering it with something of equal force. The word could not be more apposite. We are in a cultural moment of radical countervailing, perhaps as potent as that experienced in the sixties, when what was offered as counter to the power of the gun, for example, was a daisy placed in its barrel. A period of hierarchical reversal, or replacement, of this for that. And "The Ruling Class" might seem wholly part of this countervailing movement, oppositional and constructed of opposites: black replacing white, by way of a restricted black-and-white palette of charcoal, chalk, and pastel. A picture that offers a new image of power as counter to an old one.

But that's not the whole story. And Ojih Odutola—who was born in 1985, in Ife, Nigeria—is an unusually story-driven visual artist. Her 2017 breakout show, at the Whitney Museum, "To Wander Determined," with its depiction of two imagined Nigerian dynasties united in marriage, involved world-building equal to that of any novel, and in "A Countervailing Theory" the "story," as the title implies, is not merely a flipped script but also a theory concerning countervailing itself. The forty pictures in the show are hung on a curving wall at the Barbican, in London, and unfold sequentially, like a Chinese scroll. Together, they lead us deep into the wilderness of our present ideas about power—who should have it, how it should be wielded—and then out again, a journey as much philosophical as visual. What are the possibilities and the limits of countervailing, as a political or

*"Suspicious Left Behind" is one of forty pictures in "A Countervailing Theory."*



an aesthetic project? Is it sufficient merely to counter? Or might a higher synthesis be conceivable?

The project started, according to Ojih Odutola, with a “wandering charcoal line,” which she followed, “rather blindly, letting my mark making guide me . . . to see what aesthetic characteristics and proclivities recur and how to incorporate these as motifs in the work.”

(Though Ojih Odutola’s images are often mistaken for painting, she has so far worked exclusively in pen, pencil, charcoal, and pastel.) Following this line, she arrived at an unexpected destination, framed as a question. “What would it look like if women were the only imperialists in known histories across the globe?”

Which led to another: If the powerful women she was drawing were the masters, over whom did they have mastery? The story developed:

My initial aim was to tell a tale of two beings, one born, another made/manufactured, who exist within a system that enterprises and stratifies war, imperialism and hierarchies—and how these two mitigate their respective lives within it to, ultimately, cross over and come together to bring the whole system down. But they fail.

The two beings are Akanke, who is a member of the Eshu—the ruling class of women—and Aldo, one of the Koba, male humanoids manufactured to work for the Eshu, mining and cultivating food. The Koba far outnumber the Eshu—just as slave populations usually dwarf their overseers—but, like slaves, their lives are not their own and they live in fear that their masters will “decommission” them at any time, for any reason. The first eight pictures give us an idea of what it is to be Aldo. Like all Koba, seams run through his body, etched into the skin, through a process implemented, as another image, “This Is How You Were Made; Final Stages,” suggests, by the Eshu. And, as is true for all beings, Aldo’s own existence seems to be a puzzlement to him, although perhaps, as an oppressed being, he puzzles over it more intensely than the ruling class, who, in their tranquillity, tend to think only of their own power.



In “Introductions: Early Embodiment (Koba),” this existential anxiety is expressed through the depiction of hard-to-parse liminal spaces, for Koba seem to come into being in a zone somewhere between the bardo, the depths of a mine, and a penal colony—amid circles, lines, waves, and shadows, where it is difficult to say what is floor or ceiling, ground or sky. In this strange, transitional place, Koba avert their eyes; they seem fearful;

they seem fearful; each grips his own naked body, which appears to be his only possession.

The contrast with what we glimpse, in “Unsupervised Education,” of Eshu childhood is striking. Young girls, future rulers, roam their environment freely, evidently curious, touching and examining the land, even breaking off pieces

of it, at ease within their surroundings and never doubting that ease. When Ojih Odutola was asked about some of her sources of inspiration for Eshu society, she offered a line of Camille Paglia’s—“Society is a system of inherited forms reducing our humiliating passivity to nature”—and also the geometric costumery of the Dutch designer Iris van Herpen. It is easy to see, in the imperious Eshu, the ways in which this feared vulnerability is systemically disguised and obscured, by staffs and helmets, by bodies trained to show no sign of weakness or potential decay, and by clothing that, like van Herpen’s, mimics the patterns of nature and aspires to nature’s authority of form.

And yet Ojih Odutola never loses sight of the mutual melancholy that pervades asymmetric relationships of power. In “Suspensions Left Behind,” an Eshu woman crouches on the ground, her staff set aside, her helmet in her hand. She has a troubled look on her face. What is she thinking? Has she begun to suspect (like many a colonialist before her) that the asymmetric relationship between the Eshu and the Koba is untenable? For what Hegel revealed about the master-slave dialectic—and Frantz Fanon took and usefully applied to the asymmetries within both slavery and the colonial relationship—applies equally to the Eshu and the Koba: the Koba recognize the Eshu

only on pain of punishment or death, while the Eshu recognize the Koba only as far as doing so supports their own distorted self-recognition as “masters.” And, further, as it is in slavery, the more the Eshu rely on the Koba’s labor, the more dependent they in fact become on the Koba, and the more the Koba understand their own creativity and usefulness vis-à-vis the land, and demand to be truly recognized. In this mournful fable of mutual misrecognition, the secret relationship that we see develop between one Eshu, Akanke, and one Koba, Aldo, results in the creation of a third kind of being (conceived, in this world, through the act of cunnilingus—the Koba have no penises). In “Consequences Unforeseen,” twin fetuses emerge, half Eshu, half Koba, the product of a disruptive affection.

These future beings would seem to lend visual expression to Fanonian ideas of hybridity, and to offer a promising departure from a Manichaean world. But hybridity alone is insufficient. There is still the law—unjust, half blind, written by the tranquil conquerors—and in the concluding series of images we see the law crush Aldo (he is accused of killing an Eshu, a crime he did not commit). Akanke and her female partner, another Eshu, do not intervene, and Aldo, as a subject with no rights, who cannot be saved by love alone, perishes. An important lesson: recognition of the other is never solely an individual’s gift to give. Love is not law. The system in its entirety must recognize the other.

Instead, the system is oblivious; it is always facing the other way. In “To the Next Outpost,” Akanke gazes out toward a distant point of her people’s colonies while Aldo, facing the viewer, carries a heavy cable, his labor unacknowledged. In “Mating Ritual,” we see several Koba, naked as ever, bending their bodies into striking vogue-like shapes, all without actually touching one another; perhaps sexual activity between them is only psychic or virtual. No Eshu are present, but we can assume they know little of the mating rituals of their underlings. Why would they imagine a complex culture exists within a community they have refused to recognize as autonomous? In truth, power sees so little. Ojih Odutola her-



self had cause to note this paradox when she came across another vital reference point for “A Countervailing Theory,” an installment of the BBC’s 2010 radio series “A History of the World in 100 Objects.” The episode in question concerned an example of one of Nigeria’s greatest art treasures, the sculpted Ife heads, which, when it was first discovered, in 1910, by the anthropologist Leo Frobenius, was believed to have been created by Greek “Atlantians,” so improbable did it seem to Frobenius that such fine work could be the product of “savage” Africans on African soil. (Modern scholarship suggests that the heads were sculpted sometime around the fifteenth century, exactly where they were found.) For Ojhi Odutola, this absurd analysis is not only a pathetic error of the past but a continuing problem:

How could such a vivid imagination be afforded to a very misguided German anthropologist—to the point of insult in concocting such a tale—yet the very creations of our ancestors and that of our own today are seen with such limited scope and complexity?

Listening to the episode, I was struck not only by the ugly racial theory but by the form of the countervail, which was offered, in the episode, by the Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri:

The presence of tranquillity in a work of art speaks of a great internal civilization. Because you can’t have the tranquillity without reflection, you can’t have the tranquillity without having asked the great questions about your place in the universe, and having answered those questions to some degree of satisfaction. And that, for me, is what civilization is.

It is, of course, natural that when we are “othered” by the deficient colonial imagination we should want to defend ourselves against the accusation of “savagery” by asserting our own claim to “civilization.” However, I couldn’t help but remind myself that what is called “civilization” always and everywhere has its discontents, that is, those people who are not satisfied by your answers. When Walter Benjamin claimed that every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism, he made no exceptions, and, painful as it can be to acknowledge, the historical fact remains that the same community that made the exquisite Ife heads also proved capable of slave raids, of selling their fellow-Africans to European slavers,

just as the same culture that produced Constable conceived the Royal African Company, which issued slave-trading licenses to the merchants and middlemen of a thriving global business. When we are tranquil, when we believe ourselves perfectly civilized, it is usually because the claims of others are invisible to us. And there are always claims.

Ojhi Odutola’s radical visual reversals function like thought experiments that take us beyond the merely hierarchical. By positioning the unexpected figure of the black woman as master, as oppressor, she suspends, for a moment, our focus on the individual sins of people—the Mississippi overseer, the British slave merchant, the West African slave raider—and turns it back upon enabling systems. It was a racist global system of capital and exploitation—coupled with a perverse and asymmetric understanding of human resource and value—that allowed the trade in humans to occur, and although that trade no longer exists in its previous form, many of its habits of mind persist. In “A Countervailing Theory,” the habit of thought that recognizes some beings and ignores others is presented to us as an element of a physical landscape, the better to emphasize its all-encompassing nature. That system is the air Akanke and Aldo breathe, the bodies they’re in, the land they walk on. For Ojhi Odutola, it is expressed by one unending, unfurling charcoal line:

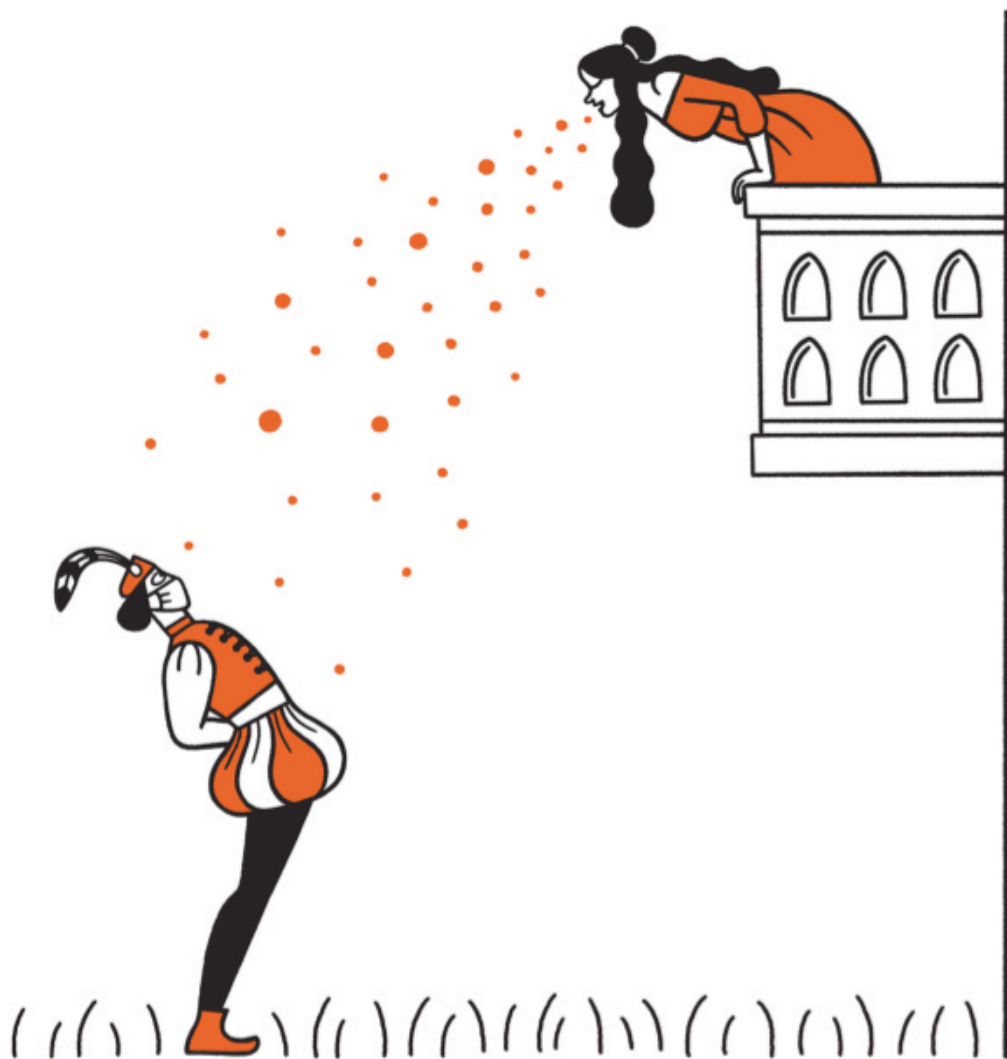
The purpose of beginning the story from the perspective of Aldo, one who is subjugated, is intentional: to show how easily one can be indoctrinated into a systemic predicament. Between Aldo and Akanke, there isn’t a clear demarcation of good or bad with regard to their respective worlds and who they are. The system in which they coexist is illustrated through the striated systems in place—with literal motifs of lines throughout the pictures—representing how the system is ever present and felt, but not explicitly stated. The system is fact.

How can such systems be dismantled? Surely, as Audre Lorde knew, it is not by using the master’s tools. “A Countervailing Theory” offers some alternative possibilities. Here love is radical—between women, between men, between women and men, between human and nonhuman—because it forces us into a fuller recognition of the other. And cunnilingus is radical, and seeing is radical,

and listening is radical, for the same reason. We know we don’t want to be victims of history. We know we refuse to be slaves. But do we want to be masters—to behave like masters? To expect as they expect? To be as tranquil and entitled as they are? To claim as righteous our decision not to include them in our human considerations? Are we content that all our attacks on them be *ad hominem*, as they once spoke of us? If our first response to these portraits of black, female masters is some variation on #bowdownbitches or #girlboss, well, no one can deny the profound pleasures of role reversal, of the flipped script, but when we speak thus we must acknowledge that we can make no simultaneous claim to having put down the master’s tools. Akanke is in these images—but so is Aldo. He must be recognized. The dream of Frantz Fanon was not the replacement of one unjust power with another unjust power; it was a revolutionary humanism, neither assimilationist nor supremacist, in which the Manichaean logic of dominant/submissive as it applies to people is finally and completely dismantled, and the right of every being to its dignity is recognized. *That* is decolonization.

One of the premises of this complex visual tale is that everything we see on the walls is archeology: pictographic images found in a black-shale deposit, with Ojhi Odutola playing the role of anthropologist, directing the research. I realized, working through these documents of a vanished system, how indoctrinated I am within my own systemic predicament, for I read “Parable Rock, Riyom, Nigeria, c. 2200 BC”—in which the heads of Akanke and Aldo are carved in stone, pressed lovingly together, and loom over the land—the same way I read Stone Mountain, in Georgia, or Mt. Rushmore, or the many giant Stalins that once dominated the landscape of the Soviet Union, that is, as an example of sentimental and deceitful state-sanctioned memory. But to the artist herself, I discovered, this rendering in rock of Akanke and Aldo is sincere—a celebration. It speaks of two beings who hoped to start a revolution by genuinely recognizing each other, in their full selves, and thus momentarily challenged a system expressly constructed to keep them apart. It almost worked. ♦





## WITH A KISS I DIE

BY ANTHONY LANE

There is just no such thing as social distancing for actors. You cannot prevent contact. That is just not the way our industry works.

—Kate Shindle, president of Actors' Equity Association.

SCENE: *Capulet's orchard. Juliet appears above at a window.*

**ROMEO:** But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.  
'Tis not the yondest window I have seen;  
In truth, I fear, 'tis not quite yond enough.  
The distance, by my reckoning, is fine,  
Being thrice the span of my out-stretchèd arm;  
The real problem here is one of height,  
With me down here and her up there and all—

It is my lady, O, it is my love!  
She speaks yet she says nothing: what of that?  
I actually *prefer* that she keep shtum,  
Because, though I am loth to criticize  
This maid that o'ershines the envious moon  
(Who is already sick and pale with grief,  
That Juliet be far more fair than she),  
The silly dope came out without a mask.  
Were she to sneeze or, worse still,  
blow her nose,  
Whose tiny tilt and rare perfection ne'er  
Shall beg the rhinoplast'rer's careful art,  
I might lie just inside her mucal range.  
By Cupid was this sacred law begot:

Thy love is deepest when thou lov'st not snot.  
(*Steps back*)  
That's better. Ah, my sweet! Her eyes in heaven  
Would through the airy region stream so bright  
That birds would sing and think it were not night.  
See how she leans her cheek upon her hand!  
O, that I were a glove upon that hand,  
That I might touch that cheek!  
(*Pause*) Not *literally*.  
**JULIET:** O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?  
**ROMEO:** Long story. My old man was keen on Duane,  
But Mom liked Rocco, 'cause it sounded tough:  
Rocky Montague, right? In the end, They compromised, so Romeo it was.  
**JULIET:** What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.  
**ROMEO:** 'Tis true, and yet is smelling anything  
A good idea, when e'en the gods themselves,  
Obeying guidelines, choose to chicken out  
When bending low to take a mortal sniff?  
**JULIET:** How cam'st thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?  
The orchard walls are high and hard to climb.  
**ROMEO:** With love's light wings did I o'er-perch these walls;  
For stony limits cannot hold love out.  
Also, there are arrows, freshly daubed,  
That show the aëreal climber where to go,  
Along a one-way route, in case you meet  
Another suitor keen to abseil down.  
**JULIET:** By whose direction found'st thou out this place?  
**ROMEO:** By love, that first did prompt me to inquire;  
And then—the traffic being as sparse as hairs  
Upon a boyish chin—by Uber. Lovely guy,  
Who swore that every inch was sanitiz'd.  
I gell'd my palms before I buckl'd up.  
**JULIET:** Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face,



Else would a maiden blush bepaint  
 my cheek  
 For that which thou hast heard me  
 speak tonight.  
 Fain would I dwell on form. Fain,  
 fain deny  
 What I have spoke—  
**ROMEO:** All right, I get the fains.  
 But when you say the mask of *night*,  
 is that  
 An actual mask, or that weird clayey  
 thing  
 With which the Duke of L'Oréal  
 doth add  
 A glow of nourishment to visages  
 Already infant-soft? I'faith, my love,  
 To show thyself upon a balcony  
 Sans mask is sure to contravene the  
 law.  
**JULIET:** And dost thou love me,  
 though I be unmasked?  
**ROMEO:** Lady, by yonder blessed moon  
 I swear—  
**JULIET:** O, swear not by the moon, th'  
 inconstant moon,  
 That monthly changes in her circled  
 orb.  
**ROMEO:** What shall I swear by?  
**JULIET:** Do not swear at all.  
**ROMEO** (*aside*): So make your fucking  
 mind up. (*Aloud*) Dearest heart!  
**JULIET:** I have no joy of this contract  
 to-night:  
 It is too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden;  
 Too like the lightning, which doth  
 cease to be  
 Ere one can say "It lightens."  
**ROMEO:** If you mean,  
 Have I been quarantined, the answer's  
*yes*.  
 And let me tell you, isolating with  
 The Montagues for any length of  
 time  
 Doth stretch me as upon the  
 torturer's rack.  
 No vaccine, though it were distill'd  
 within  
 The chambers of our learned friar,  
 could cure  
 A fortnight with my Uncle Lou—  
**JULIET:** Good night!  
**ROMEO:** O, wilt thou leave me so  
 unsatisfied?  
**JULIET:** What satisfaction canst thou  
 have tonight?  
 A kiss? Give me a break. No kissing  
 here,  
 Thou dummy, till the breath of next  
 year's spring

Shall green once more the wither'd  
 bough, if then.  
 The closest to a kiss that we may  
 come  
 Would be to don full visors, and to  
 clash  
 Adoringly, akin to knights who meet  
 And strike their am'rous armor in the  
 joust.  
 Forgive me, what exactly dost thou  
 crave?  
**ROMEO:** The exchange of thy love's  
 faithful vow for mine.  
**JULIET:** O.K., done. How 'bout an  
 elbow bump?  
**ROMEO:** Not easy from down here.  
 What else you got?  
**JULIET:** My bounty is as boundless as  
 the sea,  
 My love as deep; the more I give to  
 thee,  
 The more I have, for both are infinite.  
 (*Nurse calls.*)  
 I hear some noise within; dear love,  
 adieu!  
 Anon, good nurse! Sweet Montague,  
 be true.  
 Stay but a little, I will come again.  
 (*Exit*)  
**ROMEO:** Did she say *nurse*? Forsooth,  
 what gives up there?  
 And who is it doth need a physic's care?  
 Those damnèd superspreading Capulets:  
 I wouldn't put it past them to have  
 coughed  
 All over every other clan in town.  
 (*Juliet reënters.*)  
**JULIET:** Three words, dear Romeo, and  
 good night indeed.  
 If that thy bent of love be honourable,  
 Thy purpose marriage, send me word  
 tomorrow.  
**NURSE** (*within*): Madam!  
**JULIET:** I come! A thousand times  
 good night!  
 (*Exit*)  
**ROMEO:** A thousand times the worse,  
 to want thy light.  
 Love goes toward love, as schoolboys  
 from their books,  
 But love from love, toward school  
 with heavy looks. (*Pause*)  
 Not that anyone doth go to school  
 Or glance at books, when learning is  
 remote.  
 A generation ruined. Kids these days . . .  
 (*Juliet reënters.*)  
**JULIET:** Hist! Romeo, hist! O, for a fal-  
 coner's voice,

To lure this tassel-gentle back again!  
**ROMEO:** I'm sorry, what? Who's hiss-  
 ing? Gentle how?  
**JULIET:** Bondage is hoarse, and may  
 not speak aloud.  
 Else would I tear the cave where  
 Echo lies,  
 And make her airy tongue more  
 hoarse than mine,  
 With repetition of my Romeo's name.  
**ROMEO:** Whate'er thy wooing speech  
 may mean, 'tis *hot*.  
 I like the sound of Echo. Call her up.  
 But, really, bondage? Would you say  
 that's wise,  
 When handshakes are a no-no, and a  
 hug  
 Is no more welcome than the biting asp?  
 Is leather biologically secure?  
**JULIET:** 'Tis almost morning. I would  
 have thee gone:  
 And yet no further than a wanton's  
 bird,  
 Who lets it hop a little from her  
 hand,  
 And with a silk thread plucks it back  
 again.  
**ROMEO:** Count me in. I would I could  
 so hop.  
**JULIET:** Good night, good night! Part-  
 ing is such sweet sorrow,  
 That I shall say good night till it be  
 morrow.  
 (*Exit*)  
**ROMEO:** Sleep dwell upon thine eyes,  
 peace in thy breast!  
 Would I were sleep and peace, so  
 sweet to rest!  
 And don't forget to wash thy hands!  
 Adieu. (*Pause*)  
 Well, that went well. I haven't got a  
 clue  
 How often I should venture thus.  
 Desire  
 Doth urge me here, ascending ever  
 higher  
 Toward the dew-lac'd lips of Juliet,  
 Wherefrom to sip, with souls en-  
 twin'd. And yet  
 One drop envenom'd might our bod-  
 ies kill  
 As we make out across the windowsill.  
 Why feed the fever of my spirit, when  
 Infection rates are off the charts  
 again?  
 Love is a sickness, as the sages say.  
 Veronavirus gets you either way.  
 (*Exit, following the wrong arrow.*  
*Reënter, cursing. Exit.*) ♦





*During the lockdown, the Chinese government never trusted people to set the terms of their own behavior, but it depended*





A REPORTER AT LARGE

# HOW CHINA CONTROLLED THE VIRUS

*Teaching and learning during the pandemic.*

BY PETER HESSLER

*heavily on their willingness to work hard for various organizations that fought the coronavirus.*



A few days before my return to classroom teaching at Sichuan University, I was biking across a deserted stretch of campus when I encountered a robot. The blocky machine stood about chest-high, on four wheels, not quite as long as a golf cart. In front was a T-shaped device that appeared to be some kind of sensor. The robot rolled past me, its electric motor humming. I turned around and tailed the thing at a distance of fifteen feet.

It was May 27th, and it had been more than three months since my last visit to the university's Jiang'an campus, which is on the outskirts of Chengdu, in southwestern China. In late February, when the spring semester was about to begin, I had hurried to campus to retrieve some materials from my office. We were nearly a month into a nationwide lockdown in response to the coronavirus, which had started in Wuhan, a city about seven

hundred miles east of Chengdu. The university had informed the faculty that, at least at the beginning of the term, all courses would be online.

In those days, it still seemed possible to escape the disease by leaving China, and a number of foreign teachers at the university had departed. At the U.S. Embassy and consulates, non-essential staff had been evacuated, along with the spouses and children of the diplomats who remained. Throughout February, I answered e-mails from worried friends and relatives in the U.S. I reassured them that my family was fine, and told them that we had decided to stay in Chengdu, despite numbers that, at least at that particular moment, seemed frightening. On February 20th, when I visited campus, China's official death toll reached 2,236.

Since then, the semester had crawled along, as everybody's perspective on the

disease changed. During the third week of classes, the epidemic officially became a pandemic; by week six, the U.S. death toll had exceeded that of China. That week, China's borders were closed to foreigners, and the evacuations reversed direction—Chinese nationals in America and Europe, many of them students, were desperately trying to return home. China was the first to experience the pandemic, and it was also among the earliest countries to control the spread and enter what would now be considered normal life. In week eleven, my nine-year-old twin daughters resumed classes; in week thirteen, I boarded a plane for the first time in the post-coronavirus era. And now, on May 27th—week fourteen—I was finally back on campus.

I followed the robot until it paused on a street lined with dormitories. An electronic voice called out, "*Daoda zhandian!*"—"Arriving at the stop!" The street was empty, because most undergraduates hadn't yet returned. One new policy was that students couldn't leave after entering campus, unless they received special permission. Every gate to the university had been equipped with facial-recognition scanners, which were calibrated for face coverings. Earlier that day, when I arrived, a guard told me to keep my mask on while being scanned. My name popped up on a screen, along with my body temperature and my university I.D. number. As a faculty member, I could go through the gates in both directions, unlike students.

Now I waited with the robot, looking around at the silent dormitories. Finally, three students approached from different directions, masked and holding cell phones. Each of them entered a code on a touch screen at the back of the robot, and a compartment popped open, revealing a package inside.

One of the students told me that she had ordered her package through Taobao, China's largest e-commerce site, which is owned by the Alibaba Group. Before the epidemic, students retrieved their packages at a campus depot managed by Cainiao, another company mostly owned by Alibaba, but now the robot was also making deliveries. The student said that the machine had telephoned and texted her as it approached her dorm.



*"And, if you can't answer my prayers, I'd still love some feedback. Thanks."*



For the next half hour, I followed the robot, assuming that eventually it would lead me to its master. Whenever I biked too close, a horn sounded; if I swerved in front, the robot stopped. There was no response when I tried shouting at it. Periodically, the machine pulled over—“*Daoda zhandian!*”—and masked students appeared, clutching phones and making a beeline in my direction. On the silent campus, it felt like a scene from a horror film: “Children of the Corona.”

At last, the robot parked in front of a Cainiao depot in a far corner of campus. A worker in a blue vest came out and started loading it with packages. “We have three of these now,” he said. He explained that Cainiao workers returned to off-campus houses every evening, so the robot was a way to reduce interactions with students.

I got back on my bike and headed to my office. Along the way, I passed a series of white tents marked with the words “China Health,” in English. In one, a masked nurse was seated behind a table with two glass thermometers in little boxes. She told me that, if somebody showed a high temperature at a checkpoint, that person was sent to a tent for a more careful reading. The next step, if necessary, was a campus clinic for a swab test. I continued to my office, where a package was waiting on my desk. It contained some tools that the university had provided for my return to the classroom: five surgical masks, a pair of rubber gloves, a box of Opala alcohol prep pads. Despite the three-month absence, everything looked fine in the office. Somebody or something had been watering my plants.

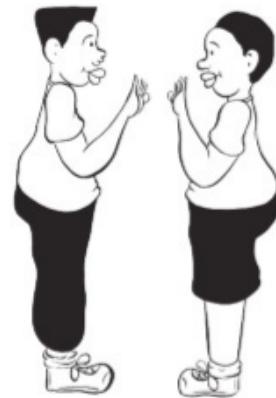
I had arrived at the university last August, to teach nonfiction writing and freshman composition, in English. My family and I moved to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, in part because it’s the region where I served as a college instructor in the Peace Corps, from 1996 to 1998. In those days, Sichuan was relatively poor, and most of my students came from the countryside. I hadn’t taught since then, an absence that essentially spanned a generation—twenty-one years.

I had returned to Chengdu in the hope of reconnecting with Chinese ed-

ucation, and I looked forward to meeting young people in the classroom. But, when the spring semester began, I found myself shuttered at home, in central Chengdu, trying to figure out how to use an online platform that had been hastily prepared by my department. Nearly thirty million college students were being educated online, along with an estimated hundred and eighty million Chinese schoolchildren. Beginning at about eight o’clock every morning, these users started logging in to platforms that were sometimes overwhelmed by the increased traffic of the online semester. Many elementary schools didn’t attempt interactive classes. My daughters, Ariel and Natasha, attended third grade at a local public school, and their teacher posted short video lessons that parents could stream whenever their connection made it possible.

The American-style Zoom course, with everybody appearing onscreen, wasn’t used by any of the teachers I knew in China. Our students were invisible: if a camera was turned on, it featured only the instructor, although even that could be problematic. Early in my nonfiction class, I tried to live-stream a lecture, but the system froze and crashed so many times that I gave up. After that, I avoided video. Every week, I prepared low-resolution photographs, maps, and documents to share onscreen, and my students and I communicated through audio and text.

In three classes, I taught about sixty students, only one of whom I had met in person. I frequently called on somebody, asking her to turn on her microphone, and slowly I began to connect voices with names. Chinese students often give themselves English names, and in the nineteen-nineties, when there was little contact with outsiders, my classroom had been full of Sino-Dickensian characters: a tall boy named Daisy, a pretty girl named Coconut. Twenty years later, I still have photographs of Lazy, who had freckles, and Yellow, who wore wire-rimmed glasses, and House, who was as skinny as a Sichuanese scarecrow. Back then, rural Chinese took pictures seriously—they



stood in formal poses and rarely smiled.

Now I had no faces, and the names seemed to have entered a more traditional era. My freshman writing classes included Agnes, Florence, James, David, Andy, Charles, Steve, and Brian. Whenever these names popped up onscreen, I remembered kids I had grown up with in mid-Missouri—in 1980, I attended fifth grade with three Brians.

When was the last time any American named his kid that? But nowadays the Chinese were making Brians in Chongqing. Most Sichuan University students came from the country’s new middle class, and I wondered about tracking China’s rise through English names—someday, perhaps, the decline would begin, with the Caitlyns, the Aidens, the Madisons.

I was glad to have a senior named Sisyphos in my nonfiction class. There were still some unusual names, although now they often reflected sophistication. In one freshman section, I had a sports fan called Curry and a rap aficionado named Rakim. Curry, who always wore blue and gold and fiddled with his mouth guard during online class (at least in my mind’s eye), wrote a sharp paper about the problems of China’s national soccer program. Rakim analyzed a reality show called “New Rap of China,” which, for some reason, had banned any Chinese contestant who wore dreadlocks. Despite being stranded in eastern Hunan, Rakim was aware of the appropriate capitalization for American ethnic groups. He wrote, “In my point of view, this rule is not only an insult to Black Culture, but also an offense to the rights that participants should have.”

Their voices came from all across the country. Through the years, institutions like Sichuan University have steadily become less regional, as part of a larger improvement in higher education. I often gave my students surveys, in order to get a sense of what their lives were like. They were scattered among more than fifteen provinces and municipalities, from Yunnan, in the far southwest, to Jilin, on the North Korean border. But all of us



began the semester in effectively the same situation. During week one, I asked students about their circumstances, and more than a quarter responded that they hadn't stepped outside their housing compounds in a month.

The Chinese lockdown was more intense than almost anywhere else in the world. Neighborhood committees, the most grassroots level of Communist Party organization, enforced the rules, and in many places they limited households to sending one individual outside every two or three days to buy necessities. If a family were suspected of exposure to the virus, it wasn't unheard-of for their door to be sealed shut while tests and contact-tracing were being conducted. One student I had taught in the nineties sent a photograph of a door in her community that had been closed with two official stamps. "I haven't seen such things since I was born, but people who are older must have some memory of such scenes," she wrote, referring to the Maoist campaigns. "We are becoming numb, which may have more bad impact than the virus, in the long run."

In my own household, I could see the negative effects on my daughters, who were desperate for interaction with other children. But it was also true that the strict Chinese shutdown, in combination with border closings and contact tracing, had eliminated the spread of the virus in most communities. February 20th, the day of my lockdown trip to campus, turned out to be the last day that the Chengdu authorities reported a symptomatic case from community spread. The city has a population of about sixteen million, but since late February there have been only seventy-one symptomatic cases, all of them imported. Virtually every case has involved a Chinese citizen who arrived on an international flight and proceeded directly from the airport to treatment and quarantine. Chengdu's success was typical in China. In one of my surveys, I asked students if they personally knew anybody who had been infected. None of them did.

During week six, I asked, "Are you currently allowed to go outside in your community? Are there any restrictions on your movement?" Again, the responses were unanimous: from Yun-

## PSEUDACRIS CRUCIFER

The father begins to make the sound a tree frog makes  
When he comes with his son & daughter to a pail  
Of tree frogs for sale in a Deep South flea market  
Just before the last blood of dusk.  
A tree frog is called a tree frog because it chirps  
Like a bird in a tree, he tells his daughter  
While her little brother, barely four years old,  
Busies himself like a small blues piper  
With a brand-new birthday harmonica.  
A single tree frog can sound like a sleigh bell,  
The father says. Several can sound like a choir  
Of crickets. Once in high school, as I dissected  
A frog, the frog opened its eyes to judge  
Its deconstruction, its disassembly,  
My scooping & poking at its soul.  
And the little girl's eyes go wide as a tree frog's eyes.  
Some call it the "spring peeper." In Latin  
It's called *Pseudacris crucifer*. False locusts,  
Toads with falsettos, their chimes issuing below  
The low leaves & petals. The harmonica playing  
Is so otherworldly, the boy blows with his eyes closed.  
Some tree-frog species spend most every day underground.  
They don't know what sunlight does at dusk.  
They are nocturnal insectivores. No bigger than  
A green thumb, they are the first frogs to call  
In the spring. They may sound like crickets  
Only because they eat so many crickets.

nan to Jilin, my students were now mobile. I decided to send them out to do some reporting.

The only student I had met in person was named Serena. She lived in a fourth-tier city in northeastern Sichuan, where her parents worked modest jobs. Whenever I called on Serena in class, I heard traffic sounds: engines, horns, voices. Later in the semester, she explained that her building was poorly constructed, with thin walls, and there was a busy road outside. Serena was an only child, like almost all of her classmates, but she seemed to lack some of their confidence about the future. Once, I asked my students if they expected their lives to be better than their parents' generation, and, out of fifty-two respondents, only Serena and two others thought that they would be the same or worse.

I had rejected Serena the first time she applied for my nonfiction class. When I was preparing to move to China, I had asked applicants to submit writing sam-

ples, in order to limit the number of students. On the first day of the fall term, Serena showed up anyway, and then she sent an e-mail asking if she could audit. I wasn't accepting auditors, but something about the writing in her e-mail made me think again. I told Serena that she could take the course for credit.

From the beginning, she stood out. She wrote beautifully—she majored in English—and I was particularly impressed with her reporting. She was small, shy, and unassuming, but she seemed to understand that these qualities could put people at ease. In the fall, I asked students to develop research projects, and Serena embedded with a group of charismatic Sichuanese Catholics who organized retreats and prayed and wept with the power of God. For her next project, she hung out at a Chengdu gay bar. This transition wasn't as abrupt as it appears, because Chengdu is known for both its Christian and its gay communities. In America, such a pairing would defy logic—San Francisco and



Tree frogs mostly sound like birds.  
 The tree frog overcomes its fear of birds by singing.  
 The harmonica playing is so bewitching,  
 The boy gathers a crowd in a flea market  
 In the Deep South. A bird may eat a frog.  
 A fox may eat the bird. A wolf may eat the fox.  
 And the wolf then may carry varieties of music  
 And cunning in its belly as it roams the countryside.  
 A wolf hungers because it cannot feel the good  
 In its body. The people clap & gather round  
 With fangs & smiles. The father lifts the son  
 To his shoulders so the boy's harmonics hover  
 Over varieties of affections, varieties of bodies  
 With their backs to a firmament burning & opening.  
 You can find damn near anything in a flea market:  
 Pets, weapons, flags, farm-fresh as well as farm-spoiled  
 Fruits & vegetables, varieties of old wardrobes,  
 A rusty old tin box with old postcards & old photos  
 Of lynchings dusted in the rust of the box.  
 You can feel it on the tips of your fingers,  
 This rust, which is almost as brown as the father  
 And the boy on his shoulders & the girl making  
 The sound a tree frog makes in a flea market  
 In the Deep South before the blood of dusk,  
 Just before the last blood of dusk. Just before the dusk.

—Terrance Hayes

Colorado Springs, together at last. But Chinese Christians and queers both represent fringe communities, and they're more likely to flourish in a place like Chengdu, which is far from Beijing and has a reputation for tolerance.

Serena's reporting was part of a trend that I had noticed in the fall; namely, that many students were good at it. Sichuan University is among China's top thirty or so institutions, but few of my students majored in media studies. Even in that department, it is uncommon for undergraduates to do much field work, because Chinese journalism classes emphasize theory. Initially, I wasn't sure if self-directed projects would be appropriate for my students, especially the freshmen, who had just completed the gaokao, the national college-entrance examination. Preparation for the exam has intensified in the past twenty years, in part because of all the one-child households, which tend to focus energy and resources on education. As a result, gaokao prep has become a brutal grind, and high-school

students have few opportunities to develop creativity or independence.

But I quickly learned that, for all the gaokao's flaws, it produced diligent researchers. The students had an extremely high tolerance for boredom, which is a lesser-known secret of effective journalism. When I explained the importance of details—numbers, signs, slogans, quotes, facial expressions—they collected data accordingly. My freshman composition classes consisted entirely of engineers, and there was no logical reason for them to be assigned journalism projects, but nobody complained. Even among these only children, there seemed to be little sense of entitlement. Near the end of the fall term, when Serena was neck-deep in Catholics and gay bars, I realized that I had failed to properly register her for the course. The administration informed me that it was too late: she couldn't receive credit. Serena's response to her nonfiction experience—first rejected, then denied credit—was to ask politely

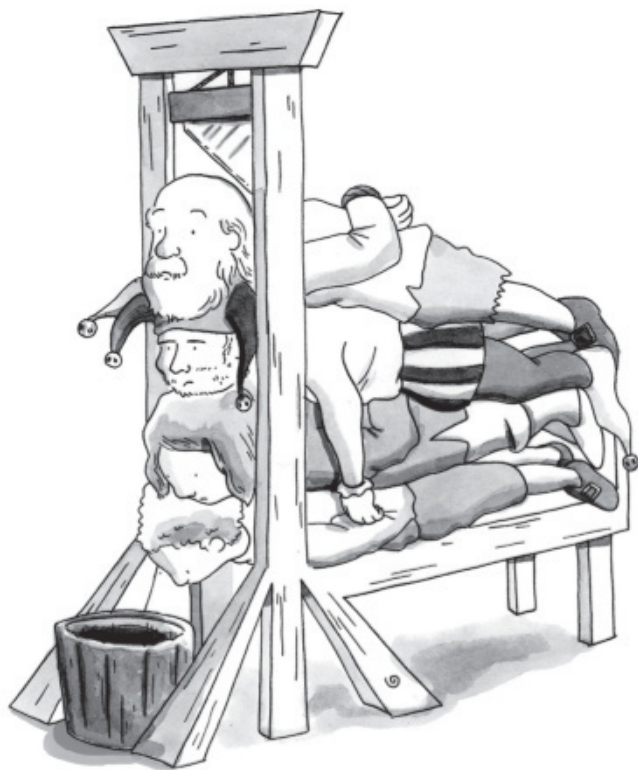
if she could finish out the term's work and then do it over again in the spring, this time on the books. That was one tradition that hadn't changed: in China, a student always respects her teacher, even if the teacher is a moron.

When we emerged from lockdown, I asked the students to write about a person or an organization that was dealing with the effects of the pandemic. Near Nanjing, Andy's family knew somebody who ran a ventilator factory, so he visited the plant, where he learned that production had increased more than tenfold. In Liaoning, in the far northeast, Momo researched a state-owned tobacco company that had suffered a steep drop in sales. In the U.S., there were reports of increased tobacco use during lockdown. But Chinese smoking is often social—people light up at banquets and dinners, and they give cartons of cigarettes as gifts. An accountant told Momo that one of the company's post-COVID strategies—and, by any measure, a new vision of public health—was to give away masks and disinfectant to retailers who purchased cigarettes.

I liked these glimpses of life from all over. In Xi'an, Elaine visited a lesbian bar, where she noted that the owner kept some of the beer warm, because of the traditional Chinese belief that cold drinks are bad for women. Sisyphos profiled a pharmacist, who outlined how one could skirt government rules on mask price-gouging, although his sense of responsibility had prevented him from doing it himself. Hongyi shadowed a loan manager at a state-owned bank in Chengdu. A new program granted deferrals to borrowers who had been affected by the pandemic, and Hongyi reported that three hundred and seventy people called the manager to ask about the program. The bank approved deferrals for twenty-two. At another branch, every applicant was rejected.

This was a recurring theme—in economic terms, individuals seemed to be largely on their own. The Party had never allowed the protections of independent unions, and across China salaries were cut and workers were laid off. In April, the country recorded the first economic contraction since the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1976. But





*"Work really piled up while I was gone."*

stimulus policies remained modest: instead of offering American-style cash payments to many citizens, the Chinese government preferred to give entrepreneurs some space to figure out their own solutions. In Chengdu, city officials allowed vendors to set up stalls on the streets. Such vendors were common in the nineties, before campaigns were launched to make the city more orderly. Now the stalls reappeared all at once, and the evening crowds in my neighborhood reminded me of how Chengdu felt more than twenty years ago.

Many vendors told me that they had been laid off from low-level jobs in factories and other businesses. But even people with stable work often found their salaries reduced. In May, when I flew to Hangzhou, an Air China flight attendant explained that she and her colleagues were paid according to flight hours, and that she now received the minimum—a quarter of her normal salary. For pilots, the reduction could be even more severe: one man who flew for Hainan Airlines told me that for two months he received less than ten per cent of his usual wage. I had many such

conversations, but people usually said they were fine, because they had savings.

They also had low expectations with regard to stability. The Chinese middle class was still too new to feel complacent, which was one reason they put away so much cash. And they were accustomed to sudden shifts in policy or circumstance. In Hebei Province, a student named Cathy profiled an entrepreneur who owned a small business that originally distributed liquor. Chen, the entrepreneur, had seen his sales plummet after 2012, when the Party banned using public funds for banquets and other entertainment, as part of a nationwide anti-corruption campaign.

In response, Chen switched to a less corruptible substance: milk. He successfully redefined himself as a milk distributor, but then, when the coronavirus arrived, everything collapsed again. Chen embarked on two months of ten-hour days riding along with his delivery crews, talking to the owner of every store on his route. He developed a series of clever promotions that, by the beginning of May, had increased his sales to their highest level ever. "In fact, I'm very grate-

ful to the epidemic," he told Cathy. "If not for that, I probably never would have gone to the shops with the salesmen again." Throughout everything, he hadn't changed his company's name—it still contained the word "liquor." Cathy asked if this was a problem for a guy who distributes milk. "They don't look at your name," Chen said. "They look at the things you do."

While officials seemed to have faith in the economic resourcefulness of citizens, the approach to public health was completely different. Very little was left to individual choice or responsibility. The lockdown had been strictly enforced, and any infected person was immediately removed from his or her household and isolated in a government clinic. By early April, all travellers who entered from abroad, regardless of nationality, had to undergo a strictly monitored two-week quarantine in a state-approved facility.

I occasionally saw the Chinese term for social distancing—*anquan juli*—on official notices, but I never heard anybody actually say the phrase. Certainly it wasn't practiced in public. Once the lockdown ended, subways, buses, and trains quickly became crowded; during my trip to Hangzhou, I flew on an Airbus A321, and all of the hundred and eighty-five seats were occupied. When I interviewed people involved in business or diplomacy, we shook hands like it was 2019. Pedestrians still spat on the street. Mask-wearing remained mandatory indoors and on transport, but otherwise little had changed about human contact.

My daughters' third-grade class consisted of fifty-five students, a number that, when school resumed, was reduced to fifty-four—one girl got stranded with her family on vacation in Cyprus. There was some attempt to separate desks, but, with so many people in a modest-sized classroom, any distancing was a game of inches. Students entered school through a tent tunnel equipped with a body-temperature scanner. A sign in the hallway listed lyrics to a new song:

Returning to school, what can we do?  
Don't be afraid, listen to me.  
Wear a mask, study well.  
It's possible to protect both me and you.



Initially, the mask-wearing was enthusiastic. On the first day of music class, my daughters were shown how to play the recorder while masked—they lifted the bottom hem and shoved the instrument inside. During school pickup, I saw teachers who had rigged up masks with external microphones that connected to portable speakers on their hips. But, in the middle of May, the Chinese Ministry of Education declared that students no longer needed to cover their faces if they were in low-risk areas, and our school relaxed the rules. Some teachers stopped wearing masks, although nearly all of the children kept them on. They found a use for discarded masks during lunch: they turned them upside down, like little pouches, and filled them with bones and other food to be thrown away.

The school scheduled regular hand-washing breaks, and every afternoon an announcement sounded over the intercom: “Temperature-taking time has arrived!” Each day, my daughters had their temperature taken at least five times. This routine began at 6:30 A.M., when the class’s WeChat parent group engaged in something called Jielong, or “Connect the Dragon.” One parent would start the hashtag #Jielong, and list her child’s name, student number, temperature in Celsius, and the words “Body is healthy.” One by one, other parents jumped in—“36.5, Body is healthy”—lengthening the list with every dragon link. My account usually had about sixty of these messages every day. After eight o’clock, impatient notes were sent to stragglers: “To so-and-so’s father, please quickly connect the dragon!”

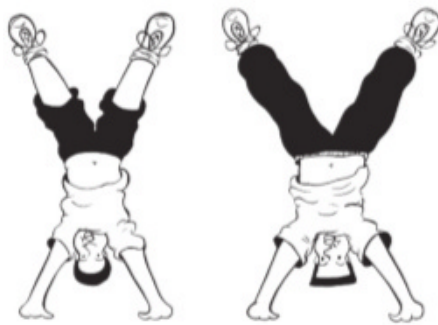
I lived in fear of the dragon. My mornings were a mess of fiddling with apps; one consisted of a daily form for the university on which I listed my temperature, location, and whether I had had contact with anyone from Hubei, the province that contains Wuhan, in the past fourteen days. If I missed the noon deadline, an overworked administrator sent a gently passive-aggressive reminder. (April 11, 12:11 P.M.: “Hi Teacher Hessler, How are you doing today?”) In addition, a QR code with a health report had to be scanned every morning for each of my daughters. I often felt overwhelmed, not to mention a little odd: during the first month of

dragon-connecting, I received 1,146 WeChat messages listing the body temperatures of third graders.

I wondered how much of this was theatre. Epidemiologists told me that temperature checks, though useful, represent a crude tool, and they generally believe that social distancing is more effective than mask use. One epidemiologist in Shanghai told me that people should wear face coverings, but he noted that there are no data on the level of effectiveness as public policy, because mask use could also affect behavior. And, while Chinese officials required citizens to wear masks from the beginning of the lockdown, they didn’t actually depend much on them. China never allowed residents to move freely in a community with significant viral spread, hoping that masks, social distancing, and good judgment would reduce infections.

Instead, the strategy was to enforce a lockdown until the virus was eliminated. The elementary school never bothered with more effective but disruptive policies—reducing class size, remodelling facilities, instituting outdoor learning—because the virus was not spreading in Chengdu. And, while the government hadn’t trusted people to set the terms of their own behavior during lockdown, it did depend heavily on their willingness to work hard for various organizations that fought the pandemic.

A number of my students, including Serena, researched neighborhood committees in their home towns. Serena



took her usual dogged approach—for much of two months, she spent two or three days a week with a local committee. She told me that, before the pandemic, she hadn’t even been aware that these organizations existed. They were like ancient organisms gone dormant: back in the eighties and nineties, when the Party interfered more in private lives,

neighborhood committees had been prominent. But there had been a long period during which they played a diminished role for most residents.

After President Xi Jinping came to power, in 2012, he set about strengthening Party structures, including a new emphasis on neighborhood committees. This process was accelerated by the pandemic, and Serena and other students observed how quickly these organizations grew in their communities. With new government funding, committees hired contract workers, some of whom were local shop owners who had been forced to close down. Neighborhood crews went door to door, giving out information, questioning residents to see if they had been to high-risk areas, and helping with contact tracing. Sometimes they made mistakes. At the end of January, an official whom Serena profiled was assigned to a compound with 1,136 units. For two days, the official and some subcontractors worked from eight in the morning until midnight, climbing stairways and knocking on doors. But they missed one apartment: when there was no answer, they failed to leave a note, and they didn’t go back for a second check.

Soon that kind of error was no longer made. In the time that Serena spent with the committee members, she observed them becoming more professional. They came to understand their role, along with the stakes of the pandemic. The Chinese state press reported that fifty-three members of neighborhood committees died while working to control the virus. Others were fired or chastised for even the smallest mistakes. That’s what happened to the official in Serena’s home town who missed the apartment—he was forced to write a self-criticism, another long-standing Party tradition. It turned out that the apartment contained the only coronavirus case in the residential district, he told Serena. The occupant—I’ll call him Liu—had been taking a shower when the committee members knocked.

At a party a week earlier, Liu had had a long conversation with a d.j., who, it was later learned, had been infected by someone from Hubei. Liu was thirty-five, single, and highly energetic. The details of his post-contact movements are listed on a public WeChat account



maintained by the city government. In China, such case histories are often available, as resources for local residents. Liu's case history notes that, during the first three days after he is unknowingly infected, he visits a bar, a store, two pharmacies, three gas stations, and six restaurants. Liu's tastes are eclectic, ranging from a pancake restaurant to a frog-and-fish-head restaurant. He picks up a friend named Huang, and he visits his elderly parents. He goes to work. He gets a fever. Post-fever, Liu hops over to a few more pharmacies, and then he keeps going: he picks up a friend named Li; he visits his parents again; he goes to another party. On the WeChat account, Liu is the Liupold Bloom of northeastern Sichuan, with every step of his urban odyssey recorded in terrifying detail. When is this guy going to stop?

Such meticulous case histories were prepared by contact tracers who worked under the direction of the Chinese Center for Disease Control. There are about three thousand C.D.C. branches in China, each branch containing roughly a hundred to a hundred and fifty staff members. Despite these numbers, the Chinese C.D.C. has traditionally been underfunded, like Chinese public health in general.

Approximately ten thousand contact tracers worked in Wuhan, where more than eighty per cent of China's deaths occurred. Epidemiologists told me that the tracers were divided into teams of between five and seven, with each group directed by an individual who had formal training in public health. Other team members might have no health background, but they came out of the same detail-oriented national educational system that had produced my students, and they often had local knowledge. Many tracers worked for neighborhood committees or other government organizations, including the police. As the virus spread, tracing teams were established across the country, and the C.D.C. recruited others who had technical expertise.

In Shanghai, a twenty-four-year-old named Jiang Xilin was contracted to work on various projects for the C.D.C. and the Gates Foundation. Jiang is in his third year of a doctoral program at the University of Oxford, where he stud-

ies genomic medicine and statistics. He had won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford after studying at Fudan University, in Shanghai. In early March, Jiang worried about the initially complacent British response to the coronavirus, and he asked his advisers for permission to return to China and study remotely. "They all thought I was crazy to want to go back at that time," he told me.

In Shanghai, Jiang helped the C.D.C. with modelling, computer programming, and writing proposals. "The first weekend, I got a call at 12 A.M. on a Sunday evening," he told me. "Nobody said, 'I'm sorry to disturb you so late.' They said, 'Did you get that proposal done?' I said, 'No,' and they said, 'We need that report by noon.'" He quickly became accustomed to such demands. Jiang also learned that, if a late-night call went silent, it often meant that the person on the other end had fallen asleep from exhaustion.

By then, many overseas students and others were coming home. It would have been useful to know exactly where they had been, so Jiang wrote a proposal requesting that Tencent, the company that owns WeChat, provide the I.P. log-in information for returnees. "They rejected me because of the data privacy," he said. He was told that Tencent was adamantly opposed to its data's being used in this fashion.

Once, when Jiang and I met for dinner in Shanghai, he showed me how our phones automatically sensed each other via Bluetooth. Such data could be used to figure out who had been in close proximity to an infected person. In another C.D.C. work meeting, a colleague of Jiang's suggested using this tool. But her idea was quickly dismissed. "They said, 'This is a violation of data protection. We can't do that,'" Jiang explained. "It was surprising to me."

It surprised me, too—given the heavy-handed tactics of many lockdown policies, I had assumed that the government used any tools available. But there seemed to have been some resistance from prominent tech companies. Tencent and Alibaba helped the government develop "health code" apps that assist in monitoring and controlling the virus's spread among citizens, but these tools are much less sophisticated than programs used in South Korea and Sin-

gapore. In Europe, virus-alert apps based on software developed by Google and Apple have been downloaded by millions of users, and the apps rely on Bluetooth signals to detect close contact with infected individuals.

In some parts of China, the health-code apps register a change in a user's location largely through a manual data transfer: if the user checks in with his I.D. at an airport, for example, or if his license plate is recorded at a toll booth. An epidemiologist in Shanghai told me that one Chinese city with a flourishing tech industry had commissioned the development of a much better tool that combines G.P.S. data and artificial intelligence to alert anyone who comes into the proximity of an infected person. "But that system was never implemented, even in that city," the epidemiologist, who asked not to be identified, said. "It could not get approval from somewhere in the government system because of data privacy." He noted that while some of the apps track location through cell-phone towers, they don't use the more accurate G.P.S. data.

"One can argue that what was most useful for COVID was old science," he continued. "The methodology is from fifty or seventy years ago. It has not changed." Jiang Xilin told me that, when the proposals to use automated data collection were rejected, the other C.D.C. researchers grumbled. But then they buckled down and continued to do the hard legwork of phone calls and face-to-face interviews. The C.D.C. policy is that, whenever a new case appears, contact tracers are called immediately, even in the middle of the night. They are given eight hours to complete the tracing.

In June, after Beijing had reported no locally transmitted cases for fifty-six days, there was a sudden outbreak at a wholesale produce market called Xinfadi. The epidemiologist in Shanghai told me that the place was well managed: masks were required, and anybody who entered had to show his health code and have his temperature taken. Even so, more than three hundred people were infected, and all the warning systems had failed to catch it in the early stages. The first alert came when a man in his fifties felt sick and went to a hospital to request a test. It was an-



other example of old science: effective public communication. The man not only recognized his symptoms but travelled to the hospital by bicycle, as officially recommended, in order to avoid infecting others on public transport. Afterward, the government locked down parts of Beijing, and, within a month, nearly twelve million residents were given swab tests. The city had the capacity to test four hundred thousand people per day.

“Recent outbreaks in places that had not recorded confirmed cases for weeks show that the virus is very difficult to completely eliminate,” Gabriel Leung, the dean of medicine at the University of Hong Kong, told me. “Coronaviruses tend to cluster in super-spreading events. It can have an explosive outbreak out of the blue.”

It can also do nothing. The Liupold Bloom of northeastern Sichuan, whose unchecked voyage across his city lasted for eight days, appears to have infected a grand total of zero people. In a sense, the outcome made no difference: one neighborhood-committee member in Liu’s city was punished, just as the outbreak in Beijing resulted in six officials being disciplined. Liu himself was never very sick. He spent a week isolated in a coronavirus ward, felt fine, and tested negative. Then, after nearly two more weeks of strict quarantine in a hotel, he tested positive again and returned to hospital confinement. By the time Liu was finally released to the world of pharmacies, gas stations, and frog-and-fish-head restaurants, he had spent sixty-five days in medical isolation. Serena asked for an interview by phone, but a neighborhood-committee member said that the experience had left Liu too psychologically fragile.

During week nine, in late April, I reviewed some student writing with a freshman class. At the end of the session, I asked if there were any questions about the essays. After a long pause, a student typed into the text box, “Can you talk about what is happening in the U.S.?”

Throughout the term, tension between America and China had shadowed our interactions. In week three, a Chinese official claimed on Twitter that the U.S. Army might have brought the



*“At what point are we no longer reënacting churning butter and actually just churning butter?”*

virus to Wuhan; in week four, Donald Trump started referring to “the China Virus.” After American fatalities exceeded China’s, during week six, the U.S. numbers exploded: ten times as many deaths as China by week ten, twenty times by week fifteen. During week sixteen, my nonfiction class discussed a book excerpt by Ian Johnson, a Beijing-based writer for the *Times*, and I told them that Johnson’s visa had been revoked back in week four. It was part of a tit-for-tat exchange between the two governments, which took turns expelling each other’s journalists.

Later in the term, some student essays referred to the death of Freud, which initially confused me. Then I realized that this was what happened when a student read Chinese news reports about

George Floyd—*Fuluoyide*—and ran the name through a machine translator back into English. Even with all the improvements in technology, distance still mattered, and I longed for face-to-face interactions during such a time. I did my best to talk about what was happening across the Pacific, but students were cautious about giving their own opinions via audio and text. I remembered how much I had depended on visual clues in the nineties, when certain subjects could make a classroom of Chinese students drop their heads in discomfort: the Cultural Revolution, or Chinese xenophobia, or any reference to the country’s poverty.

Nowadays, in a much more prosperous Chengdu, people were less sensitive and less restrained when talking in



person. They laughed about Trump—in many people's eyes, he wasn't to be taken seriously. As the spring wore on, conversations often included a standard conclusion: the pandemic showed that Chinese value life over freedom, whereas Americans take the opposite approach. I disliked such simplifications, which failed to consider the initial Chinese coverup of the virus, or the government's policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, or the fact that any number of democracies were handling the crisis much better than the Americans. (Also, the U.S. doesn't have state-owned tobacco firms that engage in mask'n'Marlboro promotions.) I tried to convey the idea that the current American failure doesn't narrowly reflect national character or values but, rather, a collapse of system: a crisis of leadership and institutional structures.

And many aspects of the Chinese strategy could never be adopted in America or in any other democracy. The strict policy of isolating individuals who test positive is also applied to children, who are separated from their parents even if they are asymptomatic. In June, a year-old Pakistani arrived on a flight and tested positive. For more than a month, the

baby was held for medical observation.

Such dramatic examples tend to distract from more useful elements of the Chinese approach. The Chinese epidemiologist in Shanghai had also worked for many years in the U.S., and I asked if there was anything that Americans could realistically learn from China. "Community engagement," he said immediately. "We don't have the neighborhood-committee structure in the U.S., but it's important to find some alternative." He noted that public-health services might have served this purpose if the American system had been properly funded. Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, told me that contact tracing is something of a lost art in the U.S. "We did a study of the measles outbreak in 2019, and they were doing minimal contact tracing," she said. "It's so incredibly resource-oriented, and public health has been decimated."

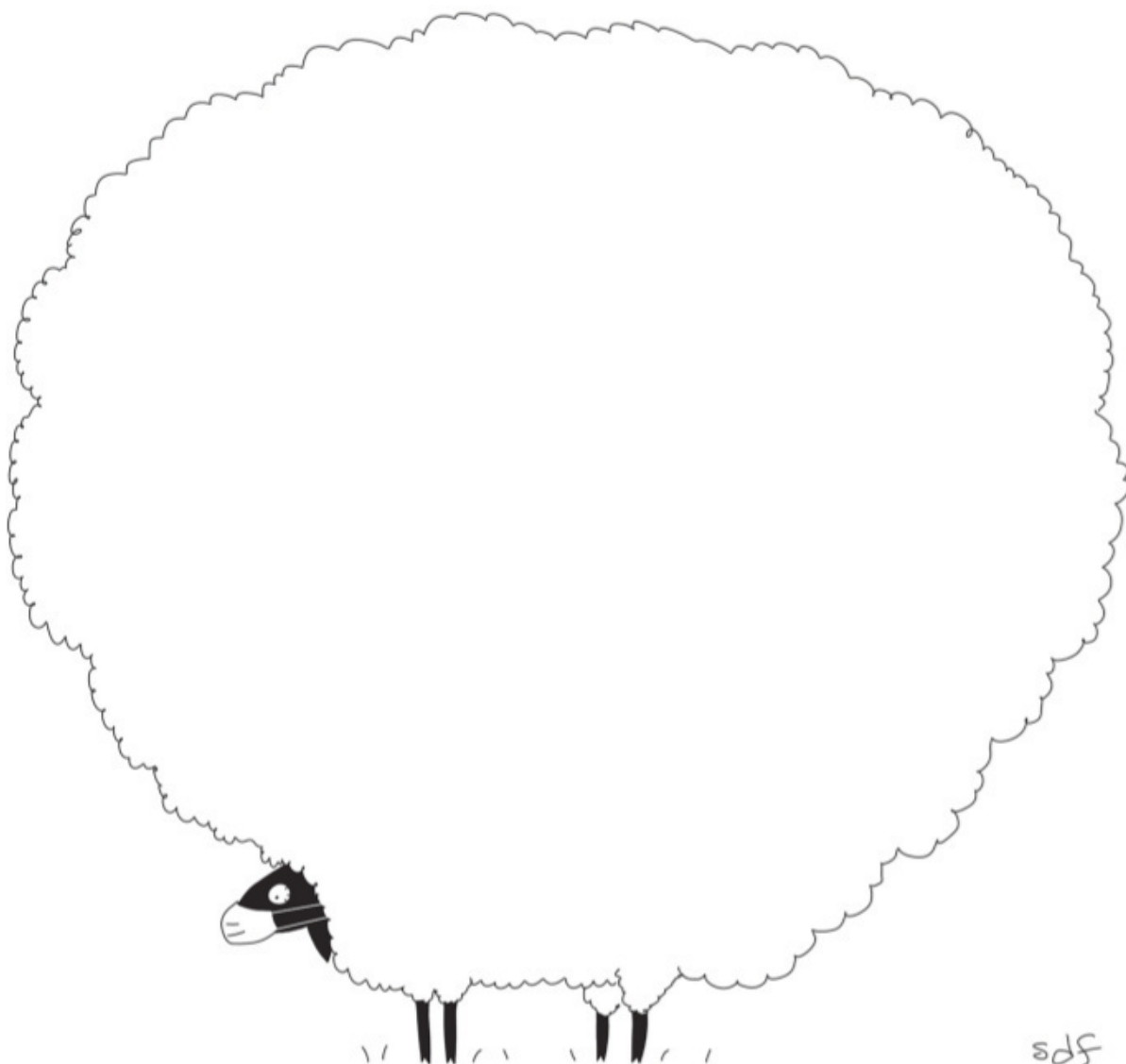
From my perspective, there are also issues of education and effort. Despite the political indoctrination involved in Chinese schooling, the system teaches people to respect science. Hard work is another core value, and somehow society has become more prosperous with-

out losing its edge. Nearly a quarter century ago, I taught young people who were driven by the desire to escape poverty; these days, my middle-class students seem to work at least as hard, because of the extreme competitiveness of their environment. Such qualities are perfect for fighting the pandemic, at least when channelled effectively by government structures. In comparison, the American response often appears passive—even enlightened citizens seem to believe that obeying lockdown orders and wearing masks in public is enough. But any attempt to control the virus requires active, organized effort, and there needs to be strong institutional direction.

Instead, the flailing American leadership seems more interested in finding scapegoats, sometimes with a racial tinge—the Kung Flu and the China Virus. Throughout the spring, the Chinese government periodically responded by lashing out at the U.S. and other foreign countries, but such tensions had little impact on my life in Chengdu. Daily interactions remained friendly, and people often made a point of telling me that the problems between governments had nothing to do with our personal relationships.

But I worried about my daughters, who were the only Westerners at a school of some two thousand students. Our isolation increased throughout the spring: most of my American acquaintances had left, and it became rare to see a non-Chinese person on the street. At the end of May, the twins told my wife, Leslie, and me that a boy in their class had made some anti-American comments, but we didn't say anything to the teacher. Virtually all of the girls' classmates treated them warmly, and, with everything on the news, it seemed inevitable that there would be scattered instances of anti-American sentiment. That week, George Floyd had been killed, and the American death toll from the coronavirus was approaching a hundred thousand.

The teacher, though, responded quickly. The following Monday, she stood before the class and told a story that, in the Chinese way, emphasized science, education, and effort. She talked about Elon Musk, and she described how his California-based company had successfully launched a manned rocket into





space the previous weekend. At the end of the story, she said, “Every country has its strong points and its weak points.”

During week sixteen, I finally entered the classroom. For more than a month, there had been rumors that undergraduates would return, as they had in some other provinces. But the final decision was always left to local officials, because, in the Chinese system, they are the ones who would be punished in the event of an outbreak. At Sichuan University, administrators seemed to decide that it wasn’t worth the risk. Senior students were called back to take their final exams, along with others who had made special requests, but most younger undergraduates were encouraged to stay home. I was disappointed—I had hoped to finally meet everybody. None of my first-year students made it back to campus.

In the end, it became another type of theatre: a dress rehearsal. The university introduced the fever tents, the delivery robots, and the facial-recognition scanners, but I sensed that administrators were mostly testing systems in preparation for the fall. Chinese epidemiologists told me that they were concerned about the possibility of a second wave of infections. Despite the country’s current success, they never seemed satisfied. “There’s no long-term plan,” a professor of epidemiology in Shanghai said bluntly. “No country has a long-term plan.” Another epidemiologist expressed concern about the lack of social distancing, believing that China needed to be prepared to use measures that were less aggressive than a lockdown but more effective than mask-wearing. “This is something we need to fix,” he told me. “There are smart people in the Chinese C.D.C. who realize this.”

The first week back, only four students showed up to my nonfiction class: Serena, Emmy, Fenton, and Sisyphos. It was like having a studio audience—the five of us talked back and forth, but we used headphones and microphones to connect with the others, who were still scattered across the country. Each returnee had a reason for coming back. Emmy was the only student who came from the countryside, and, like Serena, she had grown tired of being in a home that was loud and

crowded. Fenton needed to get some dental work done at a university hospital. And Sisyphos, as a senior, was required to return for exams.

He arrived wearing a mask, but he took it off when he saw that the others were uncovered. He was tall, with slightly wavy hair, and he said that in the fall he would enter a graduate program in economics, in Shanghai. It seemed that most seniors were going to grad school; the government had expanded academic programs in order to reduce pressure on the job market.

Even online, I had sensed that Sisyphos was shy, and I never put him on the spot by asking about his name. But now I did, and he reddened slightly. He explained that he had chosen it in high school, because he liked the Greek myth.

“So where’s the rock right now?” I asked. “Is it high or low?”

Sisyphos brought his hand level with his chest. “It’s in the middle,” he said.

I often wondered what the spring’s experience would mean to this younger generation: the Children of the Corona. “This is the first time that I feel so close to history, and I was actually reporting on it,” Serena wrote, in one of her last assignments. “I guess I’ll start to keep notes from now on.” She said that spending time with the neighborhood committee, where she saw officials and police fighting the pandemic, had also made her think about the previous term’s research. She realized that in the past such devoted and hardworking neighborhood officials had been turned against groups like the Catholics and the gay community. “All of them are good people,” she wrote. “They just happen to be in different places, and sometimes in conflicting situations.”

Throughout the semester, I had tried to connect with the voices in my headphones, and I knew that such exchanges would become even harder in the future. A number of students had abandoned plans to study abroad or to attend graduate school in America. In July, after the Trump Administration ordered the closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston, the Chinese responded by shutting down the U.S. consulate in Chengdu. Some of the damage in U.S.-China relations was bound to be long-lasting, and, in any case, the na-

tional experiences had diverged. By the time I handed in final grades, in early July, the U.S. was recording more cases every two days than the Chinese had reported during the entire pandemic.

And the lessons that a young Chinese drew from the crisis were likely very different from those of a young American. In my students’ last essays, many expressed a renewed faith in their government. Jiang Xilin, the Rhodes scholar who had fled Oxford for Shanghai, told me that he had also noticed a change in his peers from the elite Fudan University. “Even my most anti-government friends began to have trust in the government,” he said. For my last survey, I asked the students to rate their feelings about the future on a scale of one to ten, with one being the most pessimistic. After everything that had happened—the collapse of U.S.-China relations, the explosion of the pandemic, the death of half a million people worldwide—the average rating was 7.1.

Only three students came to the final nonfiction session, in week seventeen. Sisyphos was gone: like all seniors, he had finished early. Somehow, Serena, Emmy, and Fenton had learned that my birthday was the previous day, and they threw a surprise party. The robot had brought them balloons, confetti, and letters for a birthday sign, and they had a cake and a spicy Sichuanese dish called *maocai* delivered to one of the gates. Serena printed and bound a book with messages and photographs from her long-distance classmates. In the Chinese way, the notes were self-deprecating. “Thank you for reading my rough essay (quite a torment to you),” one student wrote.

For four months, I had known them by their voices, their writing, and their projects. Now, in the pages of the book, I finally saw faces: Cathy, who researched the liquor-milk man in Hebei; Elaine, who spent time at the lesbian bar in Xi’an; Hongyi, who shadowed the Chengdu bank manager. The details mattered, as we had emphasized all semester: Patrick wore glasses, and Dawn had shoulder-length hair, and Meredith stood on a beach with a dog. All of the students were smiling, their poses natural, unlike the photos of old. I wished we had met in person, but it was good to know they were out there somewhere. ♦



## WANDERLUST

*How a summer tracking musk oxen in Alaska led to a lifetime on the road.*

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

Last year, I took more than a hundred flights, travelling to twenty-three countries on four continents. From my home, in an old town on the English coast, I went east to Switzerland and Greece, and south to Mexico, El Salvador, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Chile. There were trips into the Kenyan bush, across Siberia, and to remote settlements in the Brazilian Amazon. I wasn't home for more than a few weeks at a time—my habit since I started working as a foreign correspondent, almost forty years ago.

During the quarantine, I've spent five long months at home. My office here is festooned with mementos of reporting trips: a rug from one of Saddam's palaces, a gilded leather box that belonged to Muammar Qaddafi, a piece of a Bosnian tombstone. On a wall are two nudes, painted in oil by one of Che Guevara's guerrillas; on another is a silk heraldic flag used at the coronation of King Faisal I.

In one of my early jobs, a bureau chief at *Time* encouraged me to be a "fire-eater"—to go where other reporters wouldn't. I didn't need any encouragement to get myself in trouble. Among the artifacts in my office are a pile of journals, which I began keeping in my early teens. One of them contains the record of a formative trip that I took in 1978, when I was twenty-one. That summer, I travelled to Alaska to make my fortune from musk-ox wool.

I hadn't planned on it, exactly. I was staying at my aunt Doris and uncle Warren's house in Woodside, a village tucked into live oaks and redwoods, about an hour south of San Francisco. For two months, Doris had been teaching me how to cook. I wasn't hoping to become a chef; she had assured me that if I acquired some basic kitchen skills I might be hired to join a U.S. Geological Survey expedition to the Alaskan wilderness.

Warren, my mother's older brother, was a geologist who had worked for years in remote places: Alaska, the Mojave Desert, Liberia. He was now posted at the U.S.G.S. office in Menlo Park, but he spent summers mapping the Alaskan backcountry with a team of geologists. Like Warren, most of them were hardy, deeply tanned men of few words. I met a colleague of his at a U.S.G.S. picnic one weekend: a young woman with prosthetic arms, to replace the ones she'd lost when a bear mauled her. Warren noted laconically that she was lucky to be alive.

Warren had grown up, with my mother, on a ranch in the San Gabriel Mountains, roaming the countryside and hunting in the woods. My mother told me that he had kept bobcats as pets, and at twelve survived a winter alone in a cabin in the High Sierras, tending traplines for food. During the Second World War, he had spent two years on a desert island in the South Pacific, manning a radio outpost for the Navy. Family photographs show him stark naked in a lagoon, hunting fish with a spear.

As a child, I dreamed of having a life like Warren's, and my parents did their best to mollify me. My mother, who wrote children's books, plied me and my siblings with stories about the wild world. On my bookshelf, Thor Heyerdahl's "Kon-Tiki" sat not far from "Birds of the Gambia." My father was an official in the U.S. Foreign Service, and we moved often, from Korea to Colombia to Taiwan. My family arranged wilderness excursions, and patiently accommodated a succession of feral pets: an alligator, an owl, a parrot, two mongooses, a civet cat, a pangolin.

For my eighth-grade year, my parents sent me to Liberia to live with Warren and Doris. The highlight of my time there was a three-week trip around East Africa, hosted by family friends—foreign-service types who were meant to

keep an eye on me. Instead, I went off the grid for nearly two months. I hunted elephants in Uganda, climbed Kilimanjaro, camped alone in the Serengeti, and travelled to the ancient Ethiopian city of Harar. I had never been happier. My family worried, but when I finally reappeared they forgave me, mostly out of relief that I hadn't died.

My teen-age years were largely defined by outward momentum. I worked as a *machetero* in Honduras, learning Spanish but also nearly losing a leg to blood poisoning; I spent six months living on a wharf in Las Palmas, Spain. I went to college for a year, then dropped out to take a job with the Oceanics, a New York-based alternative school that operated out of a tall ship at sea. For seven months, I guided scientists and students through the rain forests, deserts, and mountains of South America.

Afterward, I was uncertain about returning to college; most of all, I wanted to journey deeper into the Amazon. But Aunt Doris suggested Alaska, and it seemed as good a destination as any. Uncle Warren had gone there with a buddy after the war, and built a log cabin in a place called Girdwood. I'd grown up hearing my cousins' stories about their Alaskan adventures, and had read and reread "White Fang" and "The Call of the Wild." And so I went to Woodside to train in Doris's kitchen.

After a month of baking bread and cooking omelettes, I was deemed ready. But, when I applied to the U.S.G.S. to work as a summer cook, a local got the job instead. Resolved to get to Alaska, I made a list of other employment possibilities: "Kodiak Fish Canneries, laborer; Alaska Fish & Game, fish counter; Alaska Forestry Service, firefighter." Leaving nothing to chance, I'd also written to the National Geographic Institute, asking for funding to search the Honduran jungle for the ancient lost city of Ciudad Blanca. I wrote in my





*The author in his early twenties, not long after returning from his expedition to Nunivak.*



journal, “Can’t wait for the reply!” It didn’t come.

My dilemma was unexpectedly resolved when I met Mick Hoare, the son of a friend of Uncle Warren’s. Mick was a few years older than I was—a rangy guy, with black hair and startlingly blue eyes, who had served in the Special Forces and was studying geophysics at Stanford. He was planning to drive to Anchorage for the summer. Did I want to come along, in exchange for chipping in gas money?

On June 21st, we left Woodside in Mick’s Datsun pickup truck. Two days later, at a campsite in McLeese Lake, British Columbia, I wrote in my journal, “A frontier air—miles of forest—undulating seas of it. Many lakes and meadows that look like good moose haunts. Our journey began on the Solstice, so it seems full of portents. Good ones, I hope. Maybe I’ll make my fortune in Alaska.”

The Alaskan economy was booming, but the commodity was oil, not fur; the Trans-Alaska Pipeline had been finished the year before. When we reached Anchorage, after a week on the road, it looked like any other small American city: drab modern buildings that clashed with the wild surroundings, and tacky-tacky suburbs spreading to accommodate newcomers. “The town is raw,” I wrote. “Go-go girls and furriers. Gold plated prospecting pans and gold nugget jewelry.” A statewide fund had been established to use oil revenues to benefit locals—a kind of payoff for the environmental destruction—but it didn’t stop them from resenting the oilmen and the culture they had brought. A bumper sticker on cars around town read “Happiness is a Texan leaving with an Okie on his back.”

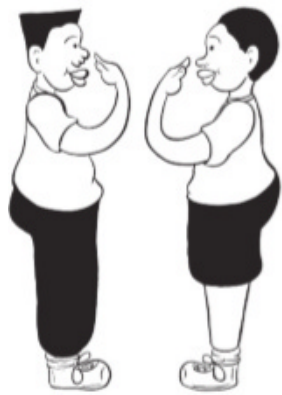
Even so, wages were exceptionally high in Alaska; construction was thriving, and that was what had attracted Mick, who was looking to earn money to pay for college. He also had a place to stay, a wooden shack that his older brother owned in Girdwood, a township forty miles south of Anchorage, at the edge of the Kenai Peninsula.

Girdwood was more like it: a few

dozen log cabins in a forested valley, with a general store, a gas station, and an old-fashioned bar that turned into a rowdy disco on weekends. Glacier-covered mountains ringed the valley, and, from the road into town, ghost-white beluga whales could be seen frolicking in the water; Dall sheep stood on rocky outcroppings on the other side.

Mick, a skilled carpenter, quickly got a job framing houses on an Anchorage construction site. Unlike Mick, I had no skills to speak of, but I rode into town with him most days to find a job for myself. On July 1st, I summed up my progress: “I called and went by some of the caterers—no dice. No dice with the railroads & so on, either.”

My heart wasn’t in any of these jobs; the point was to earn enough to finance an adventure. I’d sketched an itinerary for one “reasonable plan”: travelling by canoe down the Arctic Red River to Tuktoyaktuk, on the Arctic Ocean. “Some navigation might be necessary as the river course is thru swamp,” I wrote. “The idea would be then to live with Eskimos in their villages along Arctic Sea and winter with them, in an attempt to learn all can about hunting, living and traveling on ice.” After my father wrote to say that he had accepted a job in Sumatra, I concocted another plan, to meet him there. For the first stage of the journey, I decided, I’d build an outrigger canoe and paddle along the Aleutian Islands to Japan. Finally, I gave it up as impractical. “Ach, just another idea,” I wrote. “I am always agitating, planning, never settling.”



It was Mick who told me about musk-ox wool. His father had done some geology work on Nunivak Island, in the Bering Sea, where musk oxen roam wild. In warm weather, they shed their winter coats, called qiviut—the finest wool in the world, eight times warmer than lamb’s wool and softer than cashmere. Not long after Mick mentioned this, I visited an Alaska Native cooperative in Anchorage, which sold qiviut garments for vertiginous prices. Diana Vreeland, the editor of *Vogue*, had pronounced musk-ox wool “the ultimate in luxury.” Because of its scarcity, it was said to be literally worth its weight in gold.

There is little in the appearance of musk oxen that suggests luxury. They have survived largely unchanged from the last Ice Age—huge beasts that resemble bison, with ponderous heads and swooping horns, but have a bone structure more closely related to that of goats. They can grow to nine hundred pounds, gorging on nearly any edible vegetation that survives on the tundra. In the winter, they use their hooves to kick through the snow to expose plants trapped underneath. Often led by females, the herds defend against predators by forming a defensive circle—a tactic that works well against wolves but poorly against men with rifles. Musk oxen once ranged across the far north, but by the early twentieth century the Alaskan herd had been hunted to extinction. The cooperative obtained its qiviut from an experimental breeding farm in Unalakleet, in western Alaska. But there were many more living wild on Nunivak, the descendants of captive animals brought from Greenland in the early thirties.

I got the rest of my information from a slim book, “Oomingmak”—the word that Nunivak’s Cup’ig Eskimo people use for musk ox, which translates literally as “bearded one.” It was by Peter Matthiessen, the explorer and author, who had joined a University of Alaska expedition to Nunivak in 1964 aimed at capturing some of its musk oxen and transporting them to the mainland for breeding. On the cover was a photograph showing two oxen, squared off like tanks in a defensive posture, and another showing an expedition member with his feet dangling rakishly from an open-sided helicopter. I was enthralled. Matthiessen had something in common with the explorers and naturalists I admired as a boy, but unlike them he left no damage behind. His sentences had the sound of someone who loved words, though not as much as he loved experience.

The book had grown out of an article, “*Ovibos Moschatus*,” that Matthiessen wrote for *The New Yorker* in 1966. (*Ovibos moschatus*, I learned, is the Latin name for musk ox, meaning “musky sheepcow.”) The opening was tantalizing: “At Nunivak Island, lost in the cold ocean mists of the Bering Sea, wind and rain give way rapidly to each other. The sun rarely penetrates the



mists, and soon retreats before the rush of sea fog, as if uncertain of its authority in this melancholy place.” A few pages in, Matthiessen described the bounty available on the island: “Compared to the goat, which supplies but three ounces of wool annually, the musk ox is prodigal in its shedding, and about six pounds per animal, each summer, is scattered on the winds of the northern barrens.” By the following day, I had begun sketching out a new plan: “Have decided definitely to go to Nunivak, Bering Sea.”

I had finally found paying work, laying cinder blocks for an irascible Czech named Ivan, who was building a cabin in Girdwood. He promised me eight dollars an hour, which was good money; canning fish paid only five. With ten days of hard work, I could just about pay for my expedition. Making a very rough estimate of the quantity of qiviut produced by the musk oxen of Nunivak, I concluded that I could quickly collect a hundred thousand dollars’ worth—a figure that stayed vividly in my mind. Hearing my calculations, Mick decided to invest in the expedition. He didn’t expect anything back, he said; he just wanted to be involved. He procured a map of the musk oxen’s migratory patterns, showing where they went to breed and where they shed their qiviut.

The greatest expense was a ticket on the bush airline that flew to Mekoryuk, the Cup’ig settlement on Nunivak. Mick paid for my ticket—two hundred and fifteen dollars—and gave me two hundred to outfit myself. With this windfall, I could afford a portable stove, a parka and boots, some food, and other odds and ends, including a handheld scale for weighing qiviut, a compass, vitamins, fishing lures, and a flashlight. Mick lent me binoculars, a mess kit, and a tent. “What a trusting, considerate guy,” I wrote. “I shall do my best on Nunivak to come out wi/something.”

A few days later, Mick drove me into Anchorage to finish gathering equipment. We arrived early and waited in his pickup for the Army-Navy surplus stores to open up on Fourth Avenue. Known as Eskimo Strip, it was a few blocks dotted with rough bars, peep-shows, pawnshops, and liquor stores. As the sun rose, we saw shapes stir in a vacant lot: people waking up after a



*“I’m reassigning the murder case to the Scandinavian police. They’ll make sure it gets the withdrawn bleakness it deserves.”*

drunken sleep. We watched a tiny woman walk into a bar that was already open. A moment later, she was shoved back outside and stood there, beseechingly, as a big white man in cowboy boots waved her away. It was a depressing spectacle. “Sleazeville Alaskan style,” I wrote.

At midnight on July 22nd, with the plane scheduled to leave in six hours, I took stock. “I am finally packing everything to go,” I wrote. “Got my food, a pair of boots, a Pflueger fishing rod ’n’ reel with/lures, line, sinkers, leaders, hooks. Decided to forgo gun, pants and parka. Treated a coat of M’s with a can of Scotchgard. Hopefully should work out ok.” I had also included ten “qiviut bags,” which Mick had stitched out of an old canvas tent that neighbors had given us. We were a bit hazy on how to go about marketing the qiviut once I had it, but Mick promised to look into it while I was away.

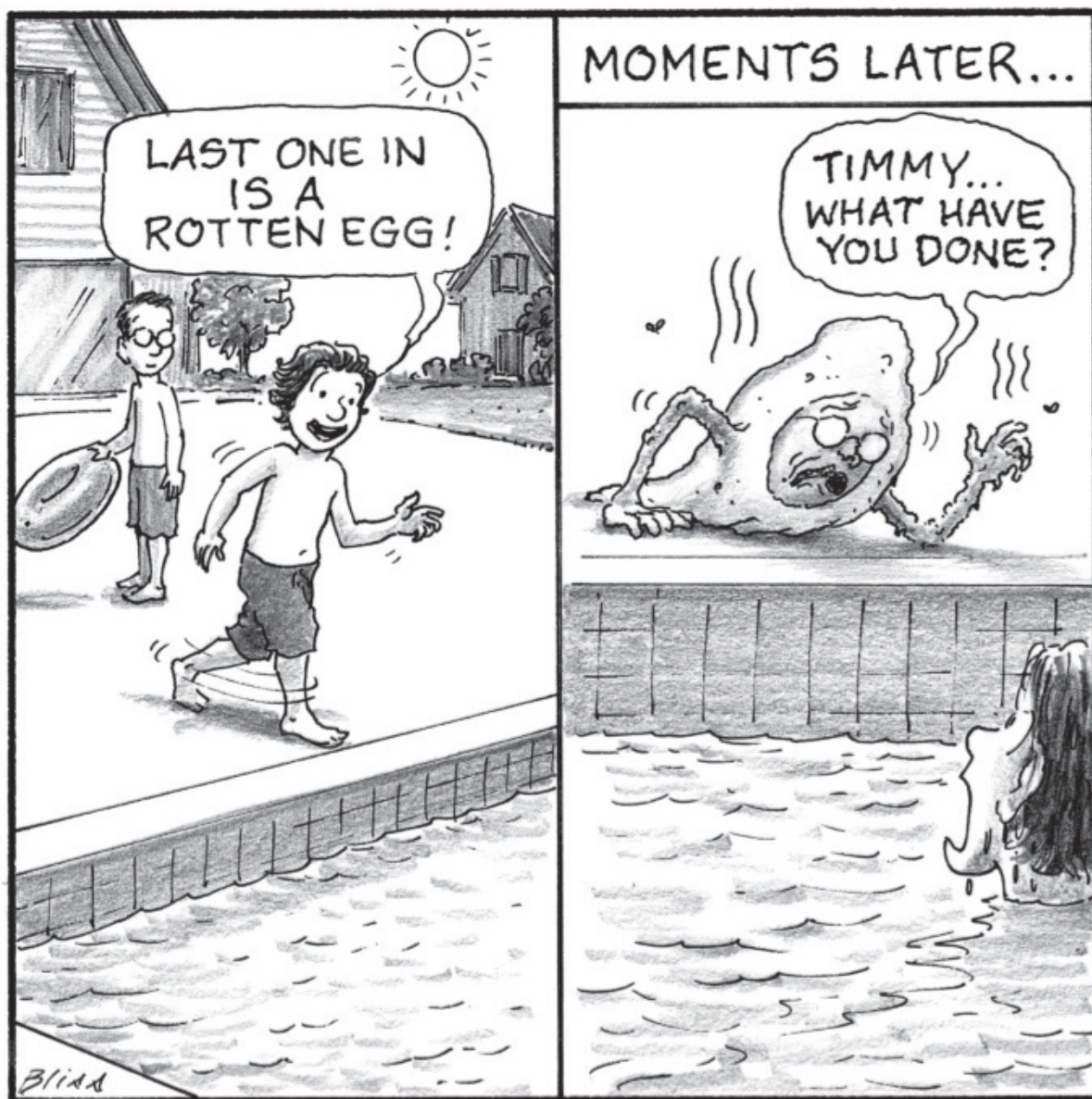
The first airplane took me as far as Bethel, a frontier town on the southwestern hump of Alaska. At the airport—a building that could have been mistaken for a Greyhound station—I learned that my fishing rod had

somehow been left behind by handlers in Anchorage. I was told that it would be sent along on the next flight, three days later. “Oh well,” I wrote. “It’ll have to be dried reindeer meat and seal jerky.” Looking through my backpack, I discovered that my flashlight and compass were gone, too.

From the airplane, Nunivak looked wild and forlorn, a rumples, brown, treeless mass sheared off from the continent by a forbidding ocean channel. The island’s center was invisible—shrouded in mist, just as Matthiessen had found it. The only other passengers were residents returning from a wedding on the mainland. When we landed, they offered me a lift into Mekoryuk, so I climbed into the back of their pickup truck and rode on a dirt track into town.

Mekoryuk consisted of a few dozen buildings, mostly weather-beaten clapboard houses and a few Quonset huts, surrounded by the detritus of the hunting and fishing life—tin boats, snowmobiles, reindeer antlers tacked to the sides of houses. There was a school, a general store, a post office, and a makeshift jail. The most imposing structure





was a wooden church, as big and red as a barn. A few hundred feet out of town, I found a spot on the banks of the river to pitch my tent—Camp One, I called it.

Uncle Warren had warned that I might “have trouble gaining the sympathy of the natives,” but, I wrote in my journal, “Everyone’s pretty friendly.” As I set up camp, some boys came by in a fishing launch and invited me aboard: the salmon were running, they said, just a few minutes upriver. After a short ride, we pulled in at a wide bend where the current frayed over a line of rocks. A few dozen men lined the banks, casting and firing guns at fish as they splashed and humped through the water. One of the men handed me a .22 rifle and told me to try my luck. Everyone watched appraisingly as I took aim. A minute later, a big pink salmon—a “humpy,” they called it—poked its bulging back and head from the water, and I pulled the trigger. The fish thrashed and then turned dead on its side. When I pulled it from the water, I saw that my

lucky shot had hit it cleanly in the head.

At Camp One that night, I fried the salmon and put it atop a pot of rehydrated ramen—my first wild meal on the island. The coffee that I made to go with it was less successful. My camp was only a few hundred yards from the river mouth, and the water was as salty as the sea.

The photographer Edward S. Curtis visited Nunivak in 1927, as part of a project to document Native American cultures, and he found the island’s Cup’ig undisturbed by Christian missionaries. In pictures, his subjects wear furs that would have cost a fortune on the mainland, and, often, welcoming smiles. Curtis described them as “a happy-looking lot,” and left hoping that the local traditions would endure. “Should any misguided missionary start for this island I trust the sea will do its duty,” he wrote. Within a decade, though, the missionaries did come.

Matthiessen arrived in 1964, and described the island as one of the last

Alaska Native settlements where aboriginal culture resisted the “iron hand” of missionaries. There were still walrus skulls mounted on rooftops and sled dogs tied up on the beach. But, even then, things were changing. “The kayaks are fast being replaced by outboard skiffs, and the dog teams by the snow sled,” he wrote. “Mekoryuk’s young men go away now to the mainland, protesting the mission ban on dancing, drink and smoking.” When I arrived, there were no kayaks left, and hardly a dog-sled in sight.

One night in Mekoryuk, a young man invited me to his house, which he shared with his elderly mother. On a side table, she had set up a portrait of Jesus, surrounded by candles and potted plants. Her son nudged me to look closely at the plants. They were marijuana. He didn’t think she knew what marijuana was, he told me—but he was sure that if he kept the plants there she’d water them.

My host said that his mother’s generation had been converted by Christian missionaries in the years before the Second World War. That was when the Cup’ig’s traditional rituals, their songs and dances, had been abandoned, and many of their artifacts destroyed, because the missionaries had insisted that they were sinful. It was only now, he said, that younger Cup’ig were trying to revive some of the old customs, before they were lost forever.

I hung around Mekoryuk for a few days, trying to figure out how to proceed. I would walk back and forth from Camp One to visit the store and to check in with the local flight agent, a woman named Marvella Shavings, to see if my fishing rod had arrived. (It never did.) I found a community pump where I could fill my canteen, but the water came out a queasy yellow. When I asked the locals if it was safe to drink, they laughed and said, “Yes, except if you’re pregnant.” Most people fetched their drinking water from upriver by boat.

I spent a lot of time at the post office, sitting on its wooden steps composing letters to people back home. It was there that I met a man named Jobe Weston, who invited me to his house, which he said was a better place to write postcards. “I never wrote,” I noted in my journal. “Instead we talked, drank coffee, and



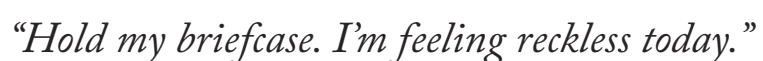
Jobe pointed to a dogsled that lay bleaching in the sun outside the house. It had belonged to his father, who he said was the last man on Nunivak to use a sled with a team of dogs. Everyone had been giving them up in favor of snowmobiles, except for those who lashed their old sleds to snowmobiles to haul supplies. On one of his father's last trips, he'd gone out on the ice beyond the seashore, and the ice pack had separated from the land. Realizing that he couldn't make it back with his dogs, he cut them loose, dived into the freezing water, and swam for shore. Much later, when I had children of my own, I realized that Jobe was offering me a gentle warning about the danger of roaming around Nunivak alone. He also lent me his rifle, "a Luger 10-shot automatic .22."

Marvella Shavings's husband, Edward, was also a guide, and when he heard about my plan he invited me over to talk about musk oxen. The walls of their house were decorated with photos of him with hunters he'd guided, posing with staunch expressions next to enormous beasts crumpled at the shoulder. For the past three years, Edward explained, the hunters had been allowed to come in March and September, and the community permitted

I'd intended to start collecting qiviut at Nash Harbor, an uninhabited site on the northwest coast where the musk oxen traditionally grazed, and where Matthiessen had set his base camp. But Edward said that the oxen, made skittish by the hunting, had abandoned their usual grazing patterns. Nobody was sure where they were these days. I made a new plan: an overnight hike, for reconnaissance, to an inland summit that the locals called Musk Ox Hill. From there, I was told, I'd be able to see for miles in every direction.

The map showed the interior as an expanse of undulating tundra, riddled

Undaunted, I packed a few days' provisions and made my way inland. Jackie hadn't misled me. The island was covered in mosquito-infested bogs, and hiking through them felt like wading through drifts of snow. Dry land was not much less treacherous: tussocks of tall grass made for unstable footing, where it was easy to turn an ankle or break a leg. The weather was raw and cool during the day, freezing at night. Still, I was finally in the Alaskan wilderness, and it was exhilarating. "Totally alone on the tundra," I wrote, from a spot that I named Reconnaissance Camp 1. "Jet streams occasionally, but that's all." I followed reindeer tracks upriver, passing lichens and flowers that covered the terrain in outlandish colors. Gulls and kites wheeled overhead. I slept out in the open that night, with my sleeping bag spread on a waterproof pad. Along the river, I had shot two more humpies with Jobe Weston's rifle, and I





cooked one for dinner. I had brought the James Clavell novel “Shōgun,” and I read to keep myself company as I gnawed on salmon.

The next morning, I found myself stalled by two blue dots on the map: a small lake and a stretch of muskeg. I skirted the lake, and cut up a tussocky ridge. As I came over the top, I spied large, dark shapes among the hummocks, about a mile away. With my binoculars, I saw that they were musk oxen—a group of them, resting.

As I made my way toward them, one of the musk oxen, a hulking bull, appeared in my path. He was clearly scouting for trouble, and though he couldn’t see me or smell me, he’d heard me, and he was taking off fast back toward the others. I moved cautiously, hopping from tussock to tussock, keeping myself downwind of the bull. By the time I was sixty feet from the group, I was close enough to see their sunstruck hair, the qiviut sweeping off their massive shoulders and into the wind. I waited, hoping that they’d move, so that I could check their resting spot. To rouse them, I attempted some birdcalls: one that I hoped would sound like a kookaburra, and one like an owl. The oxen lay there, oblivious. A stork on a nearby slope strutted about scornfully.

At last, the bull got up, turned, and stared straight at me. His horns were sharply pointed, the size of a man’s forearms. A bony plate between them made his head look covered in armor. Male musk oxen in rut are known to butt heads for eight hours at a time, with a speed and a force that no other animal can match. The only advice I had heard about being charged by a musk ox was “run.” I braced for an attack, but the bull just stood there, munching grass. Three others got up, too, clustering together with horns radiating out as a calf clambered to the middle of the group. They were, I realized, getting into a ring to protect themselves from me.

When I popped my head over the ridge, they all startled, then loped away, as quick and graceful as gazelles. On the flanks of a nearby hill, they returned to their grazing and seemed to forget

about me. I crept up to the spot where they had been resting, bag at the ready for qiviut. There was nothing but grass. “*Nada!*” I wrote in my journal. “I wonder if I’ll find *any*.”

To reach the summit of Musk Ox Hill was a climb of only a few hundred feet. “Windy at top,” I wrote. “Bleak, bleak, bleak.” A geodetic marker, dated 1951, sat next to a reindeer skull. To the south, I could see the island’s highest peak, Roberts Mountain, and to the east, across the Etolin Strait—the thirty-mile stretch between Nunivak and the mainland—I could see the outlines of Nelson Island, its shoulders streaming ice. I’d heard harrowing stories about these

waters from Jobe, who hunted there. One June, he told me, he and a friend took a boat onto the strait to look for seals. They stayed out for a few hours, lingering to catch smelt roe and shoot geese. By the time they turned back, a fog had rolled in, and they drifted blindly as the current carried them far north of town and the ice closed around them.

For two days they were caught in this limbo of fog and ice. Finally, they decided to leave the boat and set out on foot. At that time of year, the ice was treacherous—thin and unpredictable. To be as lightweight as possible, they left everything behind in the boat. Eventually, picking their way step by step, they made it back to land. Later, when the fog lifted, they hiked back out to retrieve the boat, but the ice was gone, and so was the boat. “No doubt someone in the Kamchatka Peninsula is happy,” Jobe had told me, wistfully.

Scanning in all directions from the summit, I could see no great herds of musk ox. Below me, the small group that I’d seen earlier had gathered on the shore of a lake. They seemed to be playing a game: the cow was running back and forth, the calf hustling to keep up, the bull giving chase but never catching them.

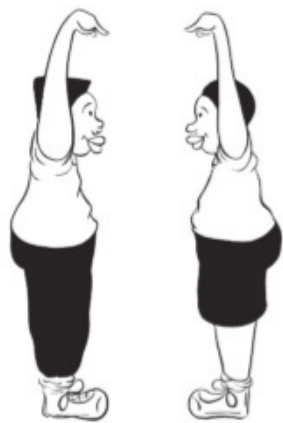
Back in Mekoryuk, a young man named Tom Nortuk introduced himself. He was about my age, a friendly kid with wide cheekbones, straight black hair, and a ruddy complexion. He’d heard

I was trying to get to Nash Harbor, and he and some friends happened to be planning a sealing trip there by boat. I was welcome to come, he said, if I helped pay for gas.

With just one day to get ready, I made a to-do list: “Sharpen knives, put second snowseal on my boots, get water, see Jobe Weston, take a spitbath, write postcards.” I bought shells for the rifle and provisions for myself—curry powder, soy sauce, Spam, cigarettes—but decided to leave most of my belongings in storage at the post office, taking along only the qiviut bags. We set off early on August 1st and spent all day tracing the island’s north coast, as Tom and his friends shot at seals in the water and the seals dodged every bullet—though there were, I noted in my journal, “some almosts.”

At Nash Harbor, we unloaded our gear from the boat and into a reindeer herder’s hut. It was all that remained of a once thriving Cup’ig settlement. A census of Nunivak in 1880 had found nine settlements on the island, with a population of seven hundred and two. Twenty years later, a flu-and-measles epidemic had killed most of them, eradicating the community at Nash Harbor. Now there was only Mekoryuk, a town of fewer than two hundred people. On a bluff near our cabin, I discovered some rubble from the old settlement, partly obscured beneath a thatch of bulrushes. Using an old caribou antler, I started digging through loose soil. “I found some cutting edges, and two bone wood-splitting chisels, and a walrus forehead,” I wrote. “All ancient!” Along the cliffs, seals and birds were competing for fish. When the seals surfaced with their prey, the birds would dive-bomb them and try to pry it away. The seals seemed to be teasing them: I saw one creep up on a swimming gull, then suddenly flip over, slapping its tail and scaring the bird away.

Musk oxen traditionally shed qiviut in the bushes that grow along cliff edges, and even though their behavior had changed since the hunting began, it seemed worth a look. I had not gone far before I found a clump of hair, which looked at first like a dead rabbit. “Just some of the white outer hairs (not sure if it’s as valuable as the darker, which I believe is the real qiviut) but it was an exciting moment. Then, later, skirting under a slanting cliff-face, I was climb-





ing up and stopped dead. There was a huge bundle of it!" Once I had collected everything I could see, I put it on the scale that I carried with me. There wasn't enough of it even to pull down the bar. Still, I estimated that I might have as much as a quarter pound—which meant that, if qiviut was worth its weight in gold, I was holding about eight hundred dollars' worth of matted, pungent fur. I allowed myself a celebration: I crossed the tundra to the river that came out at Nash Harbor and plunged in for a bath, my first since leaving Girdwood.

At nine that night, Tom and the boys took me out on the boat for a shooting trip along the cliff face. It was still dusk on Nunivak, and in the pallid light the birds wheeled above us: ducks, puffins, auklets, terns. The boys spun with them and fired their guns. It was more of a massacre than a sport; we killed twenty-five birds and left several floating in the water. I shot two myself, a guillemot and an Arctic tern. Tom's friend John said they were no good for eating, but he offered to trade me an edible bird for them, because his uncle made masks from the feathers, to sell to tourists on the mainland. (Missionaries had banned such spirit masks in the early twentieth century, but they were retrieved by explorers and traders, and became prized by art collectors in New York and Europe. André Breton was said to have been entranced by them.)

At the hut, the boys built a fire to roast birds, stoking the flames with goose feathers. Over dinner, John confided to me that he made his living as a bootlegger. Many of Alaska's local governments had banned drinking. In Mekoryuk, I'd met the town's two policemen, who seemed primarily engaged with keeping the island dry, holding local drunks in their jail. But people still managed to smuggle alcohol to the island by boat, or on the mail plane. John boasted that he made eighteen hundred dollars a month smuggling booze into Native communities, where whiskey could sell for forty dollars a bottle. At the end of the month, he never knew where the money had gone.

With their haul of birds, the boys decided to head back home. Tom told me that if I wanted to stay to collect qiviut I might be able to hitch a boat ride back with his uncle, who spent a month

every year at a place called the Dahloongamiut Lagoon, on the southern coast, catching and drying fish. His uncle's time there was almost at an end, he said, but if I hurried I might just catch him.

The next morning, I helped the boys load the boat, giving them some of my gear to lighten my pack: the qiviut, the scale, the artifacts I had collected. At the hut, I cooked two ducks I had shot, which would be my protein for the coming days. Tom had left me a plastic squeeze bottle filled with seal oil, advising me to eat it to stay warm. I planned to hike upriver and then strike out over the hills toward Dahloongamiut. "It'll be a long day, but sunset isn't until 10 pm," I wrote in my journal, adding, "Lonely here. Must have a little more to eat, roast my birds, and be on my way."

I didn't make it far. After a few hours, a fog rolled in and I couldn't see more than twenty feet in any direction. For most of the morning, the southwest wind blew on my right cheek; in the afternoon, it was suddenly on my left, and I

became frightened that I was walking in the wrong direction. (As with my fishing rod, I'd never recovered the compass after it vanished on the plane ride over.) It would be reckless to risk getting lost, and so I found a tussock, set up my pack to shield me from the wind, and put on all my warm clothes. I began kicking the grass, trying to make a flat spot where I could pitch my tent, and also to get warm. "I kicked and kicked," I wrote. "My feet were numb, no feeling." When I finally got the tent up, I found a can of V-8 juice in my bag; that was dinner.

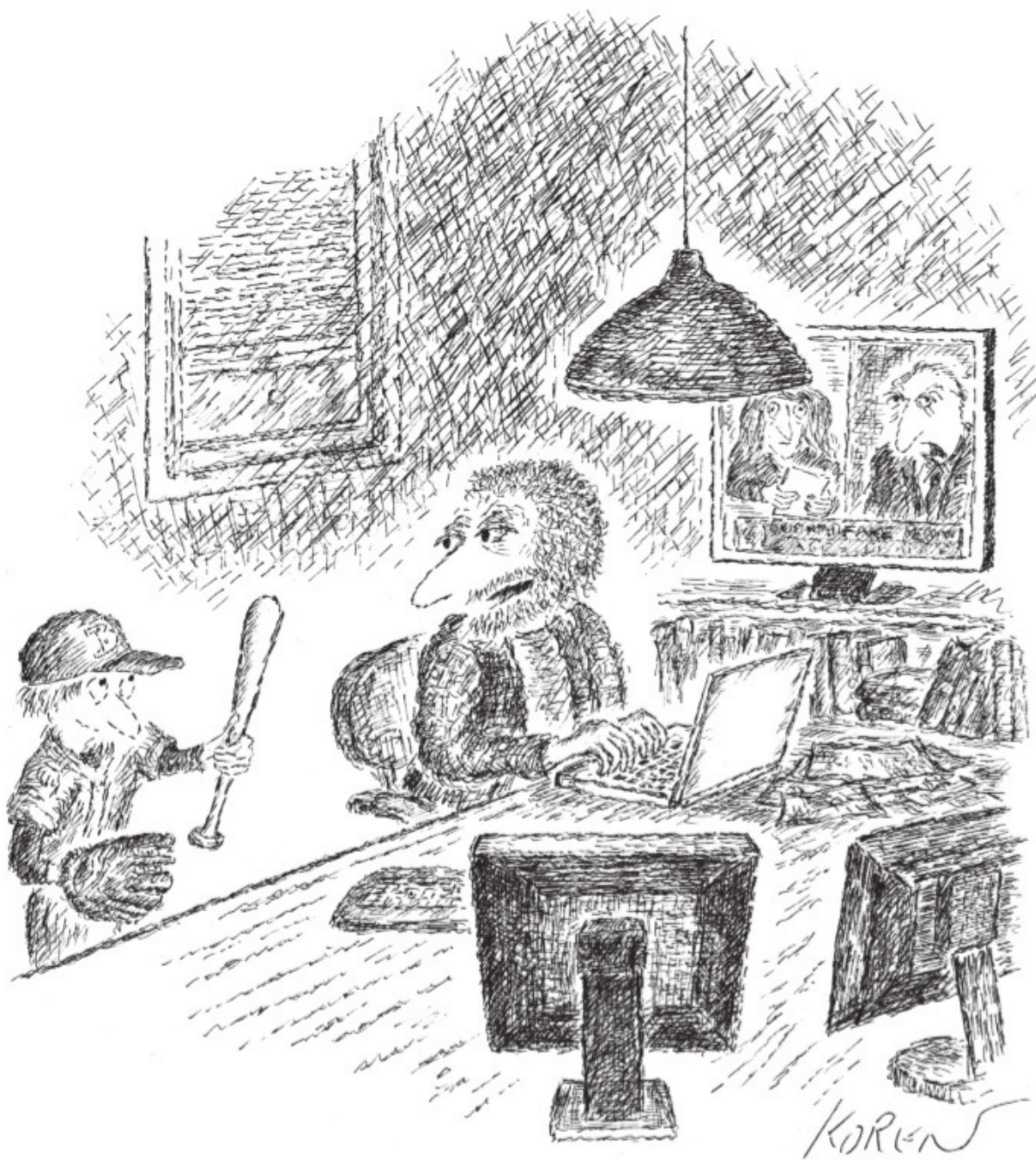
I awoke to blue sky showing through the heavy bank of cloud. As I walked, though, the mist came in again, dimming everything. I wrote in frustration, "To really hike around the isle, at the rate I'm going, would take three weeks."

Late that afternoon, along the western edge of the river, I startled a flock of Canada geese, which flew off and settled on the other side of a low ridge. I had been subsisting on Bisquick and Spam; goose would be better. As I swung my rifle into position and crept forward,



*"If you thought that the way I asked you out was cryptic, wait till we try to figure out who's paying for this expensive dinner."*





*"Later, son—right now Daddy is busy sowing disinformation."*

my eyes caught something on the ground: the ravaged carcass of a musk ox. There was qiviut everywhere, in unruly clumps. After an hour stuffing my bag, I tried to separate the ox's skull from the spine but found that there was "still too much flesh and maggots on it to be comfortable." I used a rock to break off the horns and kept those instead.

The hunters who came to the island for musk oxen appalled me, but I understood the impulse to borrow what I could from the natural world. When I was eleven, living in Washington, D.C., I took a taxidermy class at the Smithsonian, led by Dr. Charles Handley, a bat expert who served as the head mammal curator. A kind man, he arranged for me to work as a summer volunteer in the basement of the museum, stuffing pangolins and flying foxes alongside the scientists.

That fall, my father moved the fam-

ily to Indonesia, and Handley encouraged me to collect specimens for the Smithsonian. I began to fantasize about expeditions into the jungle. The year in the States had been traumatizing, with the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. Their deaths had been deeply felt in my family, and I could not understand the killers' hatred. The United States seemed like a violent and evil place, and I was happy to leave, especially to explore one of the last great tropical wildernesses.

Our stay lasted only six months; a bout of dysentery nearly killed me and my younger sister, and we were evacuated to Singapore. Then my brother fell ill, too, and my father quit his post and moved us back to Washington. When our flight stopped for a layover in California, I ran away. I set off from the Bay Area with the intention of hiking

into the Sierras and living off the land, as Uncle Warren had once done. State troopers stopped me at the edge of national-park land, sternly informed me that I was the subject of an all-points bulletin, and drove me back to my furious parents.

I was deeply disappointed to be back in the United States. Not only was it an unhappy and divided society but its natural environment was being rapidly subdued. In the U.S., with its freeways and subdivisions and shopping centers, nature had been made frivolous, turned into roadside scenery. My parents took me to talks about the end of the wild, the end of the indigenous peoples and their ways of life. I felt that if I didn't hurry up I would miss knowing the natural world altogether.

I was fascinated by men like Geronimo, Richard Francis Burton, and Shackleton. They were dead, but there was always Warren, who was said to be able to catch trout with his fingers, "like an Indian." Being "like an Indian," to my childhood understanding, meant casting off the demeaning absurdities of American life, finding ways to encounter nature without fear.

At camp that night, I thought about Tom's uncle, a trusted elder, living on his own in nature—not unlike Uncle Warren, in a way. For weeks, he stayed on the beach in complete isolation, netting salmon from the ocean and drying them in the sun on wooden racks. I worried that he might resent my intrusion, so I mulled how to present myself. What could I say to demonstrate respect?

The next morning, energized by my haul of qiviut, I followed the river, skirting its bends to save time. An hour into the hike, I paused to scan the horizon and noticed a shape against the green tundra in the distance. Through my binoculars. I could see that it was an animal, on its side, its belly distended, two legs in the air. It wasn't a musk ox, but it was big.

I took off my backpack, propped up my rifle as a signpost, and walked closer. The animal was a reindeer doe. She was in labor, and she looked terrified, legs swaying, eyes bloodshot and grotesquely wide, ears twitching. I retreated to about fifty feet away and sat for half an hour, trying to soothe her. I told her that



everything was O.K., that I wasn't going to hurt her, and that she was beautiful. I sang the first song that came to mind: "Barnacle Bill the Sailor," a sea chantey that I'd learned from my grandfather as a boy. ("It's only me, from over the sea!") But there was nothing I could do to help her, and I worried that my presence would only make her more upset. Finally, as I wrote in my journal, "I left her to her natural fate." Walking on toward the southern coast, I felt that I was abandoning an intimate. It was the closest thing I'd had to a conversation since leaving Nash Harbor, three days earlier.

After a few more ridges, I reached Dahloongamiut, a treeless stretch of lichen-covered rock at the edge of the open sea. On the beach was a sod hut, dug halfway into the earth—Tom's uncle's shelter. But there were no racks of drying fish outside, no boat pulled up on the shore. Inside the hut, it was dank and deserted. I had come too late.

Overwhelmed with loneliness, I pitched my tent on the beach. Better to be outside than to be sheltered in a place that reminded me of other human beings. Looking south across the water, I knew that there was no one between me and the Aleutian Islands, four hundred miles away. Beyond that lay the entire Pacific Ocean.

There was no qiviut at Dahloongamiut—there was nothing there at all. I resolved to make it back to Mekoryuk as fast as I could, a forty-seven-mile hike across the heart of the island. I had no written accounts to guide me. Matthiessen had tracked his musk oxen by helicopter, or in boat landings on the coasts. The Cup'ig did not often venture into the interior, either. The seals and walrus they hunted were on the coast, or out at sea; the salmon could be caught near the mouths of the rivers.

Hiking to Musk Ox Hill, I'd spent hours navigating around bogs. Now they were unavoidable; the terrain was almost all muskeg. By the afternoon, I was plagued by mosquitoes; at one point, I hurled down my pack and began cursing at them, only to realize, in shocked embarrassment, that I was yelling at *insects*. The water in the bogs was nearly freezing. Once, I stumbled in up to my knees, and, with a fright, recalled Jackie Williams's warnings about the risk of

drowning. After that, I started carrying my pack over my head. Later, I saw musk oxen far in the distance, and spent an hour approaching them, but when I got to the spot there was no qiviut to be found.

Toward sundown on the second night, I could see the northern coast, the valley lakes to the east giving off eerie mist. By then, I was hungry and cold enough to try Tom Nortuk's seal oil. When I took the cap off the bottle and sniffed, I nearly gagged—it gave off a stench like vomit. But I squirted it on a piece of dried fish, and ate it holding my nose. Before long, my body felt warmer, just as Tom had said it would.

On the third day, exhausted but determined to make it back to Mekoryuk, I hiked eighteen miles under a threatening gray sky. I arrived in darkness. "A killer, an absolute killer of a day," I wrote in my journal. "I was within sight of the northern coast all day, crossing swampy tundra and over two hills then tundra and then tundra again to reach the god-damn airstrip." But I'd been lucky, too. The grasslands were covered with wildflowers and will-o'-the-wisps, and I had picked wild celery and small, sweet nagoonberries. And I'd found a few more swatches of qiviut: the most I'd encountered since the cliff tops at Nash Harbor. By then I must have collected two or three pounds.

In quiet moments, something had been nagging at me. Before leaving the mainland, I'd received a telegram from the director of the Oceanics school, my old employer, asking me to get in



touch with her. As I slogged through miles of frigid bog water on Nunivak, I found myself seized by the idea of returning to Peru. In my journal, I recorded a vivid fantasy of a seaside table, laden with "ceviche, stuffed avocados, shrimp and beer." Back in Mekoryuk, I went to the post office to call the di-

rector. She had an offer: if I could get to Lima, she'd hire me to guide an American teen-ager into the backcountry. I was free to go into the jungle, but I should keep him, and myself, out of trouble. I told her I would be there in a few days. "Is it my wisest move? I dunno. It's certainly the most appealing," I wrote. "Always dying to see the landmark, the destination, beyond the next tussock, river, or hill."

I booked a seat on the next mail plane, then ran around saying goodbyes and thanking people for their help. I returned Jobe Weston's rifle, along with some extra ammo, and retrieved my qiviut and my Cup'ig artifacts from Tom Nortuk. Back in Girdwood, I left the qiviut and the horns with Mick. If there were to be any financial rewards, they lay in his hands. I was already sketching out an itinerary: south from Lima via Nazca, then across the desert by burro and over the Andes toward the Madre de Dios.

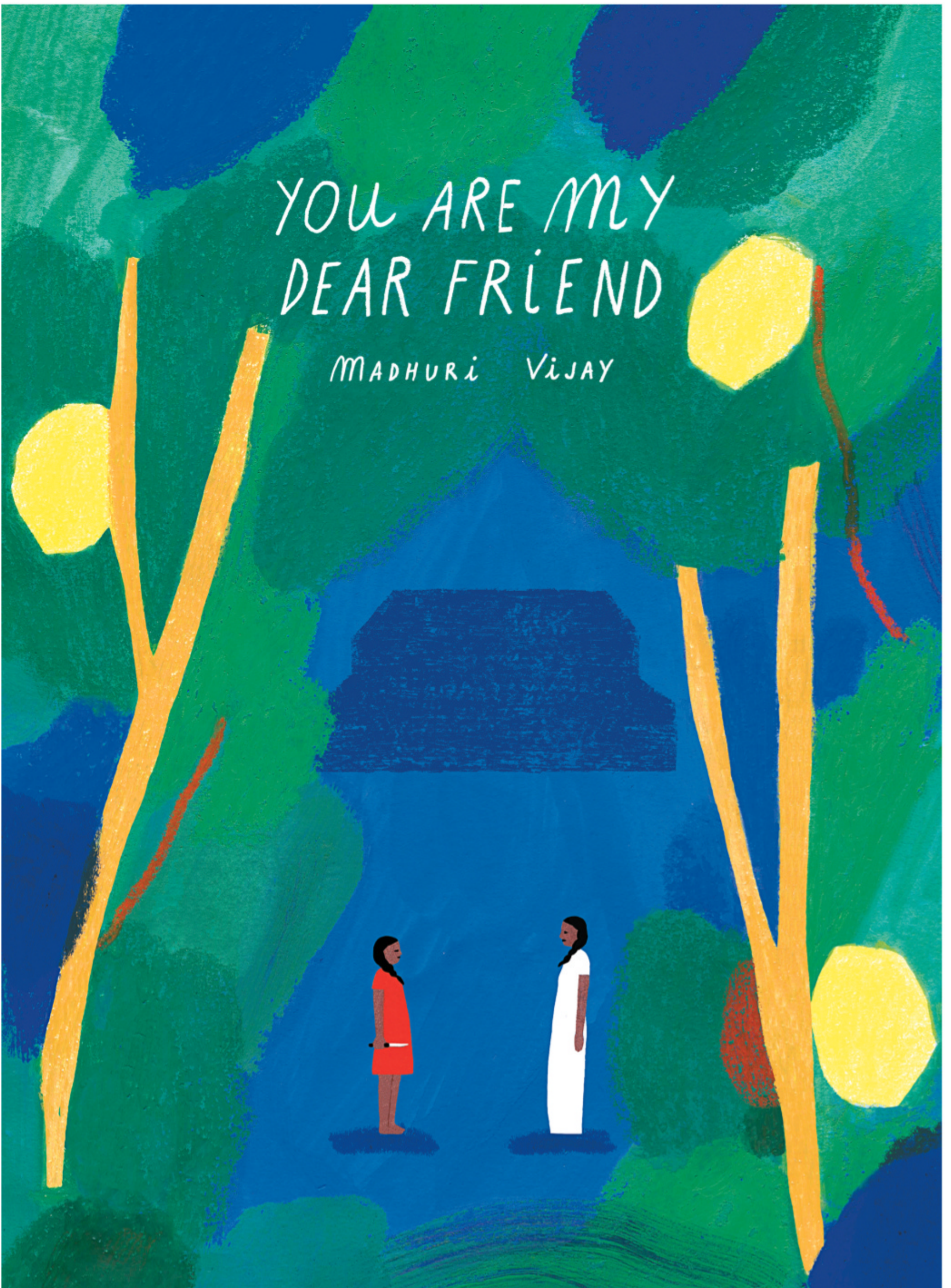
My time in Peru was eventful, if not quite as I'd planned it. We climbed the peak above Machu Picchu, a kind of pilgrimage site for me. (On my previous trip, I had travelled with a titi monkey, who liked to curl up inside my shirt as we walked. She had died on the journey, and I buried her near the peak.) We made it to the Madre de Dios, and camped near an indigenous Amarakaeri community, but couldn't enter: they had closed themselves off to outsiders, because of a flu outbreak. Downriver, prospectors had set up pumps and sluices along the banks, the pioneers of a gold boom that would ravage the area in the coming years.

In the jungle, I forgot about the qiviut and my dreams of riches. But, this spring, as I was held in place by quarantine, it occurred to me to wonder what had happened. I tracked down Mick, whom I'd lost touch with decades before. It turned out that he'd stayed in Alaska, and had a rough-and-tumble life. For a while, we told stories and caught up. When I asked about the qiviut I'd left with him, he said that he'd given it to a friend in Girdwood. Had the friend got rich? Built himself a wilderness compound? No, Mick said: he had knitted himself a hat. "A hat?" I said. "That's all it came to?" "Well," he replied, "it was only one small bag." ♦



# YOU ARE MY DEAR FRIEND

MADHURI VIJAY





The Bakers held a party in their flat, and Mrs. Baker told Geeta that she was to bring the children in to say good night to the guests. So just before eight-thirty she made the girls undress and pulled their purple nightgowns down over their heads. Sally, nine years old, stretched her chubby fingers skyward. Emma, seven, was less cooperative, but together they managed it. The girls smiled sleepily at Geeta through veils of blond hair. Holding each by the hand, she walked them up the corridor toward the smell of rum and cigarettes.

The guests were scattered across the living room, most of them reclining on the Bakers' couches with the spent aspect of runners at the end of a race. Geeta paused with the girls at the entrance.

From an armchair by the window, Mrs. Baker surfaced. Tall and thin, she wore her yellow hair in a plumb-line ponytail down her black turtleneck sweater.

"There they are," she said. "Come here, my bumblebees."

Two small hands left Geeta's, and then the girls were in their mother's arms. She heard Mr. Baker's voice from over by the bar, "Geeta has saved our lives, ladies and gentlemen. Take my advice. Don't try to go it alone in this country. Get an au pair." Now she could see him, one elbow on the bar's burnished surface. He raised his glass in her direction. "Just don't steal ours, because you'll have to fight us to the bloody death."

Laughter dribbled its way across the room. Mrs. Baker was crouching between her daughters, arms around their shoulders. She was drunk, but Geeta knew that those gray-green eyes could snap to attention at any moment. She was not afraid of Mrs. Baker, because she knew that Mrs. Baker liked her. She was not afraid of Mr. Baker, either, because in matters of child rearing, as in most others, he deferred to his wife.

"All right, little misses, say good night to this debauched lot," Mrs. Baker said. Emma giggled and said, "G'night." Sally stared at the lounging figures, something imperious in her expression. But when she spoke it was a plaintive whisper. "Good night."

"And good night to you, Geeta," Mrs. Baker said. "We'll try to be quiet, but if we disturb you—"

"I will call the police. Good night, Mrs. Baker," Geeta said.

There was more laughter. The girls' mother gave them one last squeeze and then stood, looking wistful. As the children were walking toward her, Geeta glanced around. Most of the Bakers' guests were British expatriates like them, but there were a few Indians, one of whom was sitting in a chair at her elbow, away from the rest. There wasn't supposed to be a chair in that corner. He must have dragged it over. He had his forearms on his knees and was watching her. She glanced away immediately but retained the impression of a puffy face, tired eyes behind glasses.

Then she felt the children tugging at her hands, and she marched them back to their bedroom, where she locked the windows, turned down their beds, pushed their dolls to the side, switched on the frog-shaped night-light, and stroked their foreheads before leaving them to sleep.

Her own bedroom was small but well appointed. The Bakers had told her that they were aware of how domestic help was treated in India, and that they would sooner drown themselves than treat another human being that way. So Geeta had sheets and pillows from England and a cupboard that was much too large for her few clothes. She had her own bathroom, and a cell phone, whose bill, for the past eighteen months, the Bakers had paid.

On weekdays, her mornings were hers. The children went to an international school, and as long as she was at the gate by one-fifteen the Bakers didn't care what she did. Besides Geeta, they employed a maidservant, a cook, and two drivers. The cook was old and beyond the nip of jealousy, and Geeta barely saw the drivers, but it was possible that the maidservant resented her for her relative freedom. To ward off any ill feeling, every so often Geeta brought home a trinket for the girl, who was a chatty, dimpled creature from Jharkhand. Geeta was from Odisha and had nothing in common with her, except the fact that people in Bangalore knew almost nothing

about where either of them came from.

At various times, Geeta had bought the girl an alarm clock, a pair of leaf-shaped earrings, and a fake-silver pendant engraved with the words "You Are My Dear Friend." She worried that she might have overdone it a bit with the pendant, but the girl loved it and loved Geeta for it.

A few days after the party, Geeta was walking in the Shivajinagar market. She needed nothing but enjoyed the hustle and the abundance of the place, the carts of folded handkerchiefs with crimped edges, the stacks of unbranded jeans, the enormous steel cooking pots meant for weddings. She'd paused at a stationery stall and was examining a fake-gold-nib pen when she heard her name.

Looking up, she saw a vaguely familiar man approaching her with a smile. She did not smile back but waited for him to clarify in her memory.

The Bakers', the smoke, the chair by the corner.

"You walk fast," he said. He wore a polyester checkered shirt over his trousers, and on his feet were rubber chappals. He didn't, in this outfit, look like someone the Bakers would know.

"You don't remember me," he said, sounding disappointed.

"You were in Mr. and Mrs. Baker's house on"—she paused to count back—"Saturday."

"That's right," he said. His face was less puffy than she remembered, but his eyes were just as tired. His name, he told her, was Srikanth. "How long have you been working for those people?" he asked. "What did they call you—an au pair?"

Sensing the delicate contempt behind the question, she answered, "For some time."

"And before that?"

"I was working somewhere else."

Srikanth eyed her with amusement. "Are all au pairs as talkative as you?"

By now she was thoroughly wary, which, paradoxically, made her appear serene. When he told her that he was looking for a new frying pan, she nodded. When he asked if she wanted to help him choose one, she looked him full in the face and lied, "Sorry, they will be angry with me if I don't go home."

But, just before she was out of earshot,



some instinct made her turn back and say, "Frying pans are this way. I can show you if you want."

During one of their walks in the market, which became routine over the next several months, Srikanth told Geeta that a colleague had invited him to the Bakers' party, and that he had hated it. "Not one person said anything interesting," he said. "Except for you. My little au pair."

He spoke English, Tamil, and atrocious Hindi. She spoke Hindi, Odia, and passable English. So they made English their language, though she learned a few Tamil words, flattening her tongue in her mouth to speak them. *Veetu*, house. *Mazhai*, rain. *Ponnu*, girl.

When she told the Bakers that she was leaving to get married, they did not try to dissuade her.

"I don't remember him," Mrs. Baker said. "Do you, Charlie?"

"Not well. Someone brought him

along, I think. How old are you, Geeta?"

"Twenty-nine," she said.

He nodded. "Older than I thought. But he's quite a bit older than that?"

"He is fifty-three years old," she said.

"Not a child," Mrs. Baker said, and there was a warning there, but whether it was addressed to Geeta or to Mr. Baker was unclear, as was whether it was meant to refer to Srikanth or to Geeta herself. "Emma and Sally are going to hate this, you know," she added.

Mr. Baker said, "Are we at least invited to the wedding, then?"

Geeta smiled. He sighed a little sadly, as if he'd never expected that they would be.

She called to tell Sister Stella, who took some time to remember her. Geeta could see the wide rosewood desk in the dark-panelled office. Three ball-point pens: red, green, black. The old Bible bound in brown leather, as big as a briefcase. The wooden cross on its

stand. The ruler that stretched the breadth of the desk. Sister Stella said, "And he is a Christian?"

"No," Geeta said. "But he is willing to convert."

"Oh? In that case," Sister Stella said, "this is a joyful day indeed."

They got married in March. Srikanth left for the office around nine o'clock, and Geeta spent most mornings wandering around the large house. She loved to sit in the vast garden at noon, when trees throttled the sunlight and she could hear the hectic buzzing of heat above the canopy. The house had belonged to Srikanth's father, who had, of all things, won the lottery and bought this fan-shaped slice of land in the heart of Bangalore. Now it was worth a fortune.

"He was a miser," Srikanth told her. "If he could have taken this house with him when he died, he would have. Nothing made him suffer more than giving it to me. But the only other option was Swati, and he would have burned it down before giving it to a girl."

She had met Srikanth's sister, Swati, a tall, officious woman, who arrived on the express from Chennai for the wedding. It was a registry wedding and was over before Geeta knew it. She heard Srikanth say, "Geeta, you have to sign," and she blushed, knowing that Swati was watching.

There had been a brother, too, but he had died in childhood.

The morning after the wedding, before taking the express back to Chennai, Swati invited them to visit her. She made the offer with cool professionalism, and her eyes betrayed no emotion.

"She is not married?" Geeta asked, after Swati left in a taxi, refusing to allow them to drive her to Cantonment Station.

"Why would you think that?" Srikanth asked. "She's got two children, a boy and a girl." He touched her lower back. "Not everyone stays alone for as long as you."

She knew that he had been married before, that his first wife was still alive. She knew that he had a daughter, who was grown. She did not ask for pictures or details, because early on in their meetings he had joked that he was an old man, and that by the time he'd told

## SMALL-TALK INTERPRETER



*"The phrase 'how interesting' was not meant to encourage you."*



her everything about himself she, too, would be old. She sensed the warning and was discreet. She thought of the word “divorce,” mentally pronouncing it DIE-vorce, but the one time he said it he bit off the first syllable like a hiccup: di-VORCE. And somehow that dampened her desire to hear more, as if it could only be further proof of her ignorance. Srikanth had a commerce degree; she had her tenth-standard pass certificate, which Sister Stella had handed over as dispassionately as if it were a ration card.

They had sex the night Swati left. After he climaxed, he hovered above her for another second, before letting himself drop onto her body. Then he rolled off and flipped her on her side and drew her back against him. The bed they lay on was his parents’, a high, antique frame with carved posts and a thin, pitiless mattress. Part of her longed for her room at the Bakers’, her foreign sheets, and her too soft pillows.

“And what about you?” he asked in a drowsy voice, after they’d lain in silence for a while.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. My little au pair from Odi-sha. You’re not going to tell me more about yourself? Where you went to school, what you were like as a child?”

“It is boring,” she said.

“No,” he said. “You’re not boring.”

It was not what she meant, and she began to correct him, but his hand twitched, and she knew he was asleep. She knew, too, that he had been relieved by her non-answer. It was natural, she told herself. No man at his stage in life could possibly be interested in childhood stories.

**I**n July, it started to rain. Like clockwork, for two hours each afternoon. The ground in the garden turned swampy. Sitting beneath the terra-cotta overhang of the roof, she watched the toads with their lustrous jumping throats, and the fat brown sparrows that sat impassive and then quaked themselves dry.

She heard Srikanth come back from work, calling her name. She lifted her body and brought herself inside. The house was full of dark, heavy furniture, his parents’ furniture.

“You haven’t started making dinner,” he said.

“I’ll start now,” she said, moving toward the kitchen.

“It’s almost eight.”

There was a grandfather clock next to a hatstand whose arms were antlers. She blinked.

“You’ve been dreaming all day?”

“Maybe we can go out?”

“I have been out. I just want to stay quietly at home.”

She went into the kitchen to start dinner. He followed her.

He said, “What did you do today?”

She poured a cup of rice into a pot and ran her fingers through it, feeling for stones.

“Nothing.”

“Did you read?”

There was a library, full of stiff-spined books he claimed his father had bought to make himself appear more intimidating to visitors.

“A little,” she said. She had taken down one of the books, but its leather binding had reminded her of Sister Stella’s Bible, and she had spent the rest of the afternoon thinking about the hot convent-school courtyard and the dreary, soothing presence of the nuns.

“I don’t understand,” he said finally.

“Understand what?”

“You! What is it that you want? In this world?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“Nothing?” he echoed. “Not even a child?”

She looked up at him. He was smiling in a way that made her, for a moment, furious. Then the fury was gone. She picked out a stone from the rice, flicking it away.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” he pressed. “You want to have a child?”

She didn’t answer. He took the pot from her hands and set it down.

He said, “I’m not a young man anymore.”

“I know.”

“You know everything,” he said, teasing her now. “My genius little au pair.”

And he led her by the hand to the antique bed with the four carved posters and that punishing mattress.

**F**ive months later, on Christmas Eve, they went to midnight Mass. Srikanth had still not converted, but he promised to do it soon. He fell asleep during the hymns, and Geeta had to

wake him when the choir began to file out. He drove them home and fell asleep again right away, while she lay awake, trying to think of how to phrase what she had to say to him.

The next morning, she said, “I think we should go to a doctor.”

He frowned at her. “I’ve already had a child, remember.”

“I know,” she said. “It is me.”

The doctor at Baptist Hospital confirmed this. That week, Geeta caught a bus and rang the bell at the Bakers’ door. The maidservant answered and hugged Geeta.

They discussed her problem. The maidservant was of the opinion that Geeta’s sterility was a good thing, but when she saw Geeta’s expression she leaned in conspiratorially.

“You can do adoption, you know,” she whispered.

Geeta shook her head. “It takes many years, and it is very expensive. And those adoption people will see how old Srikanth is, and they will say no.”

“But that’s only if you do it here. In Jharkhand, babies are being adopted all the time. I know a place where no one checks. You can do it fast, and they will give you any baby you want. Old, young, boy, girl.” She sat back and scrutinized Geeta’s face. “You should get an older child. Otherwise your husband will be dead before it has started walking.”

**T**he first thing that surprised Geeta was the girl’s height. Rani was eight but nearly as tall as she was. Her brown eyes took in the house with a single glance. On the train, she had been silent, eating very little but doing it obediently. Now she stood still, staring at the mossy steps leading to the veranda and the flowerpots that held only ancient gray dirt. Srikanth had already gone inside with Rani’s bag.

In Ranchi, the orphanage director, a scraggy woman with a coal miner’s cough, had given them Rani’s background, which amounted to no more than a blur of prejudices. She was supposedly from a tribal village deep in the forests of eastern Jharkhand. She had come to the orphanage a year before, deposited by an older girl who claimed to be her sister but could as easily have been her mother. The father was not in the picture, and everyone



was almost certainly better off that way; there was the lurking stink of criminality, possibly even Naxalism, around him. Rani was not intelligent, the orphanage director went on, tribal girls rarely were, but she was strong and could help with the house. While all this was being conveyed to them, Geeta glanced at Srikanth, who was nodding seriously, as though he'd expected no less. With a chill, she wondered if he was listening to anything the orphanage director was saying. At the end, when he turned to her and asked, "Are you sure you're ready?" she was tempted to shake her head, but then she thought of the empty house waiting for her and said, "Yes."

"Come inside?" Geeta murmured now. Rani stiffened, then ran up the steps and into the hall. She drew abreast with the grandfather clock just as it lurched to four. Her thin frame flinched with each gong, but when it was over and she turned to look at Geeta, her face was blank.

"This is where you'll sleep," Geeta said.

She had chosen the room with the best view of the garden. It had been a storeroom, Srikanth had told her, in the days when he was a child and his family had four Brahmin cooks working for them. All four had slept in here. The soft wood of the door still smelled of grain and hemp. She had put in a cot and an almirah and placed a chair by the window. Because the rooms of her own life had never contained more, she had left it at that. It was, she told herself, the view that would count. A jackfruit tree stood outside, with elegant, tortured branches, and fruit that looked like fat, milk-bloated babies. She might have liked the room for herself, but she knew that Srikanth would have found the idea of sleeping in a storeroom outrageous.

She was disappointed, therefore, when Rani barely seemed to notice. She resisted the urge to point out the room's advantages and instead asked, "Do you need anything?"

Rani's thick black hair had been shorn and was growing back unevenly over her ears. She wore a frilly peacock-blue frock that draggled at the hems, the same one she'd been wearing when they first saw her. Her upper lip protruded;

it was possible that she was bucktoothed.

"Do I need anything?" the girl repeated. Her voice had an anesthetized quality, but within it twitched a slippery, mocking thing. Then she smiled. It was an unnerving smile to see on an eight-year-old face, somehow innocent, cunning, and flirtatious at the same time, and Geeta, to her shame, panicked.

"Then I'll leave you to rest," she said, turning her back on both the girl and the view. Her first failure, as she would later come to think of it.

She had resolved to be unshakable with Rani, but almost immediately she found herself swept up in a soft tangle of mitigation and half lies. Each morning, she lay in bed, worrying about the things the girl was going to do and say that day. They had decided that she would stay at home until the new academic year began, that it was important for her to feel accepted into their family before shouldering the challenges of school. But the truth was that Geeta felt like the one on trial. Rani loped around the house and had a tendency to sneak up on Geeta.

"The pictures are dusty," Rani would say, and Geeta would run for a cloth to wipe the frames.

"There is hair in the bathroom," she would observe clinically, and Geeta would run to lift the knob of knotted hair from the drain, dropping it into the trash with a shudder.

"You don't know how to cook," she whispered one night to Geeta, when Srikanth had left a little rice on his plate. "Even he hates your food."

At other times, she would say nothing, merely watching Geeta at whatever she was doing. As a way to compensate, Geeta found herself talking. Avoiding her own history, she babbled on about her husband's life at great length.

"This house is very old," she said. "Your grandfather won the lottery. Your father has one sister, Swati. You'll meet her. She has two children, a boy and a girl. Your cousins." She glanced at Rani, then continued as though she had doted on these children for years. "Lovely children, very well behaved. One day you'll meet them. When your father was small, he used to think there were a hundred rooms in this house. You know how, when you are small, you think every-

thing is so big? Your father's family is vegetarian. His mother allowed only Brahmins to cook their food. She kept four cooks." She halted, hating the sound of what she'd said. "Your father had a brother," she said, concluding, "but he died when he was small."

"How did he die?" the girl asked, perking up.

"I don't know," Geeta said. "He was sick, I think."

"Did he have tuberculosis?"

"No."

"Cancer?"

"I don't think so."

"Pneumonia?"

"No!" Geeta exclaimed. "I mean, I don't know."

"You didn't ask?" Rani asked slyly. "You're so stupid, you didn't even ask?"

Geeta shrank back. "Your father and I got married only one year ago," she heard herself say slowly. "But he was married before."

"He is very old, isn't he?"

"Not so old."

"He is an old cocksucking bastard," Rani declared. And Geeta was shocked, less by the profanity than by the girl's matter-of-fact tone, though she could not deny that there was something slightly comical about it, too, the bald innocence of the pronouncement.

"Rani!" she said, making an attempt to sound authoritative. "That's enough! Don't say such things about your father!"

"He's not my father," the girl replied scornfully. "My father went to jail."

Geeta felt slightly dizzy. "I didn't know."

"And you're not my mother. My mother is a poor woman," Rani said. She stepped close to Geeta, her chin tilted up, her eyes dark and powerful, albeit with a detached kind of intensity. "You are a rich woman. You can help my mother."

"What do you mean?"

Rani smiled. She had a million different smiles, and this one was regretful, benevolent, nearly tender. "Where is your jewelry?" she whispered.

It took almost a month for Geeta to tell Srikanth about any of this. In that time, Rani proved herself a master of single-mindedness. At times she was wheedling, at other times forceful.



## AUBADE AS FUEL

Your lip an abstraction of iris always arousing  
the question of the bed. Which goodbye lasts?  
Only yesterday my hands rich with dirt. I told you  
*Milkweed is my new salvation addiction*. You know  
I always need to save something, to control it.  
I can make a pollen island, make your collarbone  
a spiritual landscape, the air around us orange  
and alive. The shape you left in the sheets  
a Rorschach I read as a rattlesnake's skeleton  
in the silverware drawer, no, a fire in a cabin,  
no, a cabin on fire, the absence it will make.  
But look at me now, my heat signature a whole  
bouquet of howling, straddling scarves of smoke.

It's O.K. that it's over. Leaving is a lesson of  
pleasure. My ribs, sets of parentheses. My heart,  
an aside, an apple ready for the twist. My legs  
around your hips, a pillory, our shame public  
to the night. Tulip shadows on the nightstand,  
an apology marooned and lightless, each bite  
mark on your shoulder synonymous with grief.  
You ask me to brush the match against the red  
phosphorus of *Goodbye* in a way that makes  
you believe it. I ask to be the one on top, the one  
struck bright when God pours out the lightning.

—Traci Brimhall

Always it was the same demand. She wanted Geeta to send jewelry to her mother. Geeta lived in this big house, she was rich, so there had to be jewelry. Where was it?

Then one afternoon she found Rani going through her cupboard. It was kept locked, the key under a lace doily on the dressing table, but Rani must have seen her retrieve it. Now the door stood wide open. One of Geeta's saris had slipped to the floor. Her piles of nighties and petticoats lay slumped against one another.

"What are you doing?" Geeta asked.

"It was like this already," Rani said. She sounded bored with her own lie.

"If you're looking for jewelry, you won't find it there."

A scowl creased the girl's forehead.

"Bitch," she said.

"I may be a bitch," Geeta said, struggling to remain calm. "But I adopted you. Even if I give you jewelry one day, it would be for you, not for your mother."

Rani turned and thrust her hand

into the cupboard. Another sari fell to the ground.

"Rani!"

Drawing a breath, Geeta stepped forward and grasped the thin shoulders. The touch seemed to inflame Rani, for she began thrashing, but Geeta kept her hold until they were both outside the room. Then she let go, breathing hard. Rani stood still for a second, then leaped for Geeta, giving her arm a painful pinch before fleeing to her room and slamming the door.

That night, when they were in bed, Geeta described the incident to Srikanth. After she finished, he lay silent for a long time. Just as she began to wonder if he'd fallen asleep, he said, "This is what you wanted."

She didn't reply. Her arm, where Rani had pinched it, was black and yellow.

"You said you were ready," he continued. "I asked you, and you said you were ready."

She said nothing.

"I go to work every day," he said. "I

sit in an office and earn money for you. Now the girl is my responsibility also? I've already finished raising my daughter, my little au pair." His voice sounded far off. "You'll have to find your way with this one."

Rani began making startling pronouncements. One afternoon, she threw her arms around Geeta's waist and said, "I love you, I love you, I love you." She said this fiercely. Her voice tore into Geeta like hooks. Two hours later, she told Geeta that she was ugly. "You look like a black rat," she said. "Black like shit."

"My mother fell," she said, on another occasion. "She fell into a hole and then she tried to pull me inside. It was very deep." And on another day: "I saw my father. He was not wearing any clothes. He is very happy and he likes his food." And on still another day: "There were many people hiding in the jungle around my house."

From these sinister fragments, Geeta pieced together the mosaic of a short and terrifying life. She saw a weak, protective mother, an absent, unpredictable father, poverty, the looming threat of outsiders, the fear of corrupt authorities. She recalled her own parents, who, despite their curtailed presence in her life, had at least encased her in the solid outline of their love. Her father, a timid and cooperative tenant farmer, was given to breaking into soft, worried monologues that no one was allowed to hear, whispering it all to himself so that he wouldn't burden his wife and daughter. Her mother, grave and hilarious, could change her voice at will, now putting on the staid airs of a village elder, now the coarse twang of a city dweller. And those voices had remained with Geeta, even after the accident that had killed both of her parents. The convent-school years, the stone courtyard, her work for the Bakers, even her marriage—they all felt to Geeta like manifestations of her mother's never-ending repertoire.

It occurred to her, of course, that Rani could be lying, but Geeta had the suspicion that what she said was more or less accurate. Rani's lies were obvious and lazy; these baroque narratives suggested a more insidious truth. It could not be prodded from her. She could not





*"In my day, we froze to death, but we were happy."*

be asked to explicate. So Geeta listened and tried to make sense of it, of this strong, mad child.

By April, Rani seemed calmer, and her proclamations had cooled, no longer burning with the terrible heat of prophecy. She seemed more prone to conversation, one day even asking Geeta to comb her hair, which Geeta did as gently as she knew how. Midway through, Rani leaned back into her chest and made a small, unconscious grunt of pleasure. The sound brought tears to Geeta's eyes, and in that moment she allowed herself the hope that maybe the worst of it was over. In front of Srikanth, however, Rani was mute, and he, in turn, passed over them both with the distracted benevolence of a politician taking a pause from state matters.

Only once more did she attempt to talk to him about the girl. She suggested that Rani might be lonely without the company of other children and wondered if they might visit his sister in Chennai. He said, "I know children better than you. There's nothing wrong with her. Let her learn how to entertain herself. If you spoil her now, she will never be satisfied later." His tone was so darkly bitter that she imagined he was speaking from experience, and

she thought about the daughter he never saw or mentioned.

"These types of girls," he went on, "they try to get everything from you. If you give them one thing, they will ask for five the next time. Let her learn to be happy with whatever she has."

She didn't ask what he meant by "these types of girls." Tribal girls, girls from the north, rural girls, girls with shady pasts, low-caste girls, girls without money, Adivasi girls, girls clawing their way up, nonvegetarian girls, girls without morals, hardened girls, orphaned girls, ungrateful girls, or simply girls—it might have been any one of these.

The Bakers' maidservant came to visit at a time when Geeta knew Srikanth wouldn't be at home. Rani was introduced, the maidservant given a cup of tea and shown around the house. They wandered from room to room, and the maidservant was extravagant with her praise. At one point, the maidservant turned and Geeta saw that she was wearing the pendant she'd given her, with the engraving that read "You Are My Dear Friend." She commented on it, saying how nice the maidservant looked.

"I never take it off," the maidservant declared, fishing it out from the neck-

line of her kurta and holding it dramatically up to her lips.

Geeta saw Rani's gaze fix briefly on the pendant and then drift away. When the maidservant had gone, Geeta took the teacups into the kitchen and started to wash them. She heard Rani come in but she did not turn. Then a dazzling pain shot through her back, and she whirled around, knocking Rani to the floor. The knife skittered away, still dotted with pieces of the onion Geeta had been chopping earlier. The cut was low down and alarmingly near her spine, but she could tell at once that it was not deep. She touched it and felt warm blood. From the ground, Rani looked up at her, and there was nothing in her face to suggest that anything momentous had taken place.

"Why did you do that?" Geeta asked, voice trembling.

"You gave that bitch your jewelry."

"That wasn't jewelry!" Geeta cried.

"It was just a cheap necklace I bought in the market. It's not even real. It's worth nothing."

She took two quick steps and picked up the knife. Before she could think twice, she'd washed it and put it back in the drawer.

"Stand up," she told Rani. "We're going to the doctor."

Her wound was dressed, but thankfully no stitches were needed. She did not tell Srikanth what had happened. She kept an eye on his shirt buttons, she cooked his meals with care, but she no longer thought of them as married.

Instead, she focussed her energy on Rani. They had settled on Sophia Girls' School, run by Catholic nuns of a devout strain, of whom Srikanth approved because they were rumored to be strict, and whom Geeta liked because they reminded her of her own schooling. Rani would begin in June. She had taken an oral aptitude test and had proved, notwithstanding the orphanage director's bigotry, to be extremely intelligent.

The first day of school would be the fifth of June, a date that acquired for Geeta a kind of shimmer. All she had to do was make it to the fifth, she thought. If she could take Rani safely to the shoals of that bright morning, then it would be the end of the trial



period; she would have succeeded; they would have won.

After the incident with the knife, Rani was subdued. She woke early and made her bed. She folded her few clothes and kept them in the cupboard. She never left her wet towel on the bathroom floor, as Srikanth did. She ate whatever breakfast Geeta gave her, then walked out to the long concrete driveway, which had once been gravel raked every morning, according to Srikanth, by a man in a white uniform. The first time, Geeta worried that Rani might climb the gate and disappear. At noon, she pretended to wander by the front door. She saw Rani marching from one gatepost to the other, then back again, a dark shape crossing a river of concrete. Geeta shouted that lunch was ready and Rani responded immediately. From that day on, she was inside before Geeta had to call.

Until the day she wasn't. Geeta put the food on the table and waited for ten minutes. Then she went to the door. Rani was speaking with a man who stood on the other side of the gate. He had a wispy mustache and his hair was locked in place by glinting gel. He was dressed in the uniform of youth—a red shirt tucked into tight jeans. As Geeta walked toward them, his eyes flickered to her; he said something to Rani, ducking his head. Then he strode off, tipping an invisible hat to Geeta.

"Who was that?" Geeta asked. "Rani, who was that?"

Rani turned with a radiant smile. "My father is not in jail anymore."

"What?"

"He said my father sent him. He's going to take me back to my father."

"Rani, listen to me. What did he say? Did he tell you his name?"

Rani shook her head. Her smile grew still more radiant. Geeta thought of the man's insolent hat tip and felt weak with fear.

"Rani, does he come every day? Has he talked to you before?"

"He told me my father has come out of jail. My mother is calling for me. He said if I go with him he will take me back to my village."

In one swift motion, Geeta leaped at the gate and flung it open. She ran

out into the street and saw the red shirt, as small as a stamp.

"I'll kill you!" she screamed. "Don't come back again! Are you listening? I'll kill you if you come back! I'll kill you!"

When Srikanth came home, she described the young man to him, the terrifying promises he'd made to Rani. This time, Srikanth stood up and came unnecessarily close to her.

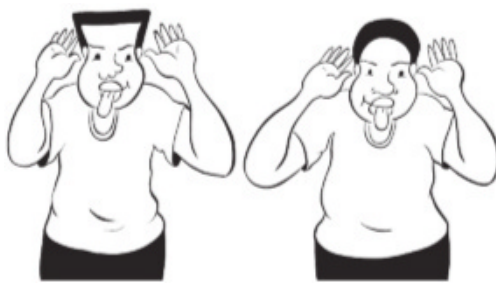
"She's too much for you," he said. His breath smelled of onions and filter coffee. "Admit it," he pressed her. "You can't do this. You are not capable. Look at you. Your hair is a mess. You don't take care of the house anymore. You hardly look at me. You only think of her."

A month ago, she might have protested, but it no longer mattered what was and wasn't true. The threats had become too many, too nebulous. Later, she would think of this as her final failure. The first and the last, the only two clear in her mind.

"You may have been an au pair," he said, drawing himself up, "but I am the one who has actually raised a child."

"Please," she whispered. "Talk to her."

Rani was in her room, where Geeta had instructed her to stay. She had not told Srikanth what had happened after she screamed at the young man: the way Rani had attacked her, the scratches



even now blossoming on her neck, the girl's terrible moans.

Rani was, Geeta noticed with a pang, sitting by the window, on the chair Geeta had placed there months before, looking at the garden. She did not turn around when they came in.

"Young lady, you are not allowed to go near the gate again, do you understand?" Srikanth said in a sonorous voice, and Geeta wondered for whom he was performing. Partly for her, but partly, she suspected, for his

vanished first wife. "I give you the money for your food. I paid for that chair you're sitting on. As long as you are under my roof, you will listen to me. And you are not allowed to speak to strangers."

Rani turned her head and smiled.

It was a smile that Geeta had never seen before. Beautiful and powerless, it robbed Geeta of breath. She wanted to run over and hug the girl, but she could feel Srikanth puffing up beside her, working himself into a fury with all the mechanical purpose of the clock in the hall.

"Are you laughing at me?" he asked softly.

At that, the girl's smile became even more helpless. Geeta closed her eyes, and at the moment she opened them she saw a strange thing—a gray-green blur shooting down outside the window. It took her a moment to realize that it was a jackfruit.

"You think you can disrespect me?" Srikanth was saying. "Just because my wife lets you disrespect her," he continued grandly, "you think you can disrespect me? Eh? I know how girls like you think. Sly, that's what you are, sly. Fine, if my wife can't do it, I'll teach you to behave. I'll teach you to be scared."

He lifted a finger in Rani's direction.

"Pack your clothes," he ordered.

Father, mother, child, suitcase. It was a parody of the family trip Geeta had suggested months ago. Srikanth, still swept up in his own theatre of punishment, carried Rani's battered bag all the way to the gate, then set it down in the dust. Rani and Geeta followed, walking a foot apart, not touching.

"Go," he told Rani, holding the gate open. "Pick it up and go."

Rani picked up the bag. She slipped under his outstretched arm and past the gate. On the other side, she rolled her shoulders back, as if warming up for a marathon. She was much healthier than when she had first arrived, her face and figure fuller, her hair more lustrous, long enough now to touch her neck.

"You want to find your father and mother?" Srikanth demanded. "Go find them and don't come back here."

Rani began to walk. She walked in



the direction the young man had taken earlier.

Srikanth stepped out onto the pavement and Geeta followed. Now they could see Rani's back, her shuffle more pronounced because of the weight of the suitcase.

"She won't go far," Srikanth grunted. "She'll stop."

But Rani did not falter. She passed under a street lamp, and light raked her hair.

"She'll turn around," Srikanth said. "She'll turn and start crying at any moment."

The girl walked. On and on and on, without the slightest shift in her stride. Unaccountably, Geeta felt laughter bubbling from inside her.

"Quiet!" Srikanth snapped.

Rani had arrived at the last street lamp. She passed under it only as a shadow, and then she was out of sight. Geeta could not tell which way she had gone.

She turned to Srikanth, who seemed to be in shock. For a moment, they looked at each other, and she saw what ugliness could be released when the bloated complacency of a man like him was ruptured.

"She's playing with us," he said. "She won't really leave. Where can she go?"

"Why doesn't your daughter call you?" Geeta asked suddenly, speaking in her normal voice. "In a whole year, she hasn't called you. And you haven't called her."

He turned slowly to face her.

"You know what I think?" Geeta continued. "I think you don't know where she is."

He froze. Then, as if it were intolerable to remain even a moment longer with her, he took off running in the direction that Rani had gone.

Geeta stayed where she was. A young couple came past, walking their small dog, and she smiled at them. A breeze picked up, bringing the smell of grilled chicken from the hotel next door, and she felt a quick pang of hunger for meat.

After a long while, she saw two figures coming back up the road. Rani was still carrying her own suitcase, her walk as unhurried as ever.

The girl did not look at Geeta as she stood holding the gate open. Srikanth, too, avoided looking at her. He was

huffing, his face shining with sweat. Geeta waited a moment longer, then padlocked the gate and followed them in.

That night, he pulled her to him in the old way, the two of them on their sides, his chin at her shoulder. Her eyes were closed, but she could see clearly enough. Their strange bodies, made stranger together, perched on the raft of the mattress.

"We can't do anything for her," he was saying, his voice a murmur, as dry as paper at her collarbone. The girl was damaged, he said, had been damaged from the day she was born. They would never be able to control her, they would never be able to love her enough; the older she grew, the more uncontrollable she would become, and who knew how she might hurt them, which shady characters from the streets she would invite inside the house. And once they were inside they would rape Rani, they would steal, they would murder Srikanth and Geeta in bed. And suppose Rani did manage to track down her father and mother, or they managed to find her? They might hold the child as ransom, use her as leverage to extort money. Perhaps this had been the idea all along. Softly, he whispered his insinuations into Geeta's shoulder, her ear, as tender as a man making love. It would be better for the girl to be with people who understood her, he said, people used to dealing with girls like her. It would be better for everybody, Geeta included, Geeta especially, to let her go. Wasn't Geeta tired? Wasn't she ready to go back to her life, to reading or wandering in the market, to things as they had been before? Why take on the extra burden? The girl would be fine. She had lived in their house for less than six months. She would forget soon enough. If they saw her again, she would barely remember them.

"So, my little *au pair*? What do you say?"

She thought of her mother's voices, blurring and shifting, already onto the next thing, the next impression. Her father mumbling his worries to himself. Sister Stella's Bible and multicolored pens. The hard ridges of the healed cut on her back. All these things she would never tell Srikanth about, but the fault was only partly his. She had lost the habit of speaking of herself, and now it was impossible to recover the details

that could have made her permanent.

She heard herself say to her husband, "Yes."

Over the years, they have sold off pieces of land. The hotel next door bought some, wanting to build a forested restaurant, where guests could eat dinner under softly lit trees. They sold some to a developer, who promptly built a twenty-story residential tower boasting "Unparalleled Views! Beauty Redefined!"

The residential tower has its own grocery store, where Geeta now does her shopping. This is not allowed, strictly speaking—the store is meant for residents only—but the security guard lets her in, nodding at her in a way that suggests that he believes they are in collusion against some higher authority, possibly his supervisor. The staff in the grocery store have no idea that she is not a resident, and they sometimes offer to carry her bags up to her apartment, which she politely declines. She has developed a dignified way of walking, has learned how to use her smallness to her advantage. That, coupled with the fact that she is quiet and aware of the people behind the counters—the thin boys, the young girls—makes them solicitous.

There is one girl she particularly notices. The girl works in the cosmetics section of the store, her hair pulled back in some elaborate way Geeta can't figure out, pimples powdered out of recognition, her lips a shocking magenta or pink. She wears the same uniform as the rest of them, a blue T-shirt tucked into black pants, but there is an air about her, lusciously indolent yet vicious, that Geeta finds attractive. She wanders over to try products she can never imagine using—"That is face serum," the girl tells her with shining derision when Geeta absently tries to dab something from a little bottle on her wrist—merely for the feeling that the girl produces in her. She would never go so far as to say that the girl—whose name is Ruby—reminds her of Rani. No, that would be too easy, cowardly, as if all girls who have come from unknowable places to stand in front of her were somehow the same. It is the relationship that is the same: Geeta and Rani, Geeta and Ruby. The girl stands there blazing and exposed, and Geeta circles her, unable to look away. ♦

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Vijay on the complexity of identity.



# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## TOP DOWN

*Isabel Wilkerson's world-historical theory of race and caste.*

BY SUNIL KHILNANI

As the summer of 1958 was coming to an end, Martin Luther King, Jr., was newly famous and exhausted. All of twenty-nine years old, he had been travelling across the country for weeks promoting his first book, “Stride Toward Freedom,” a memoir of the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott—a protest that, at three hundred and eighty-two

days, was the most sustained mass action in American history. It had led both to a Supreme Court decision that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional and to retaliatory bombings of Black churches. The book tour was meant to mobilize support for the movement’s next phase, but days after his first event he’d been kicked, choked, and ar-

rested by the Montgomery police. And now, in Harlem on September 20th, he was being denounced as an Uncle Tom for not appearing at a Black-owned bookstore whose politics conflicted with the mainstream image he was trying to project. So he sat at a table with a pile of books at the white-owned Blumstein’s department store on West 125th

*In Wilkerson's view, racism is only the visible manifestation of something deeper, a hidden system of social domination.*



Street. It was a store that didn't even sell books—a store whose management refused to hire Black clerks until a boycott forced the issue. The staff had put his signing table at the back, by the shoes.

"Is this Martin Luther King?" a woman in sequinned cat-eye glasses asked when she got to the table. He said yes, and she plunged a steel letter opener deep into his chest.

Later, King viewed his months of recovery as a period of productive recalibration. It became clear to him how much stamina he would need to withstand the battles and backlashes ahead. He marked the end of his convalescence by going to India, the birthplace of a man whose self-discipline he had admired since he was in theology school: the late Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of the mass movement that secured India's independence from the British, in 1947. King had most recently enacted Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence by publicly forgiving his would-be assassin, a woman who struggled with mental illness.

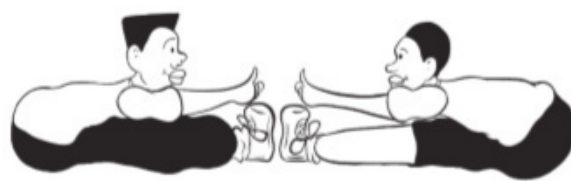
King liked to say afterward that he'd gone to India as a pilgrim. Arriving home, though, spiritual lessons weren't what he wanted to share. He was more animated by the concrete political steps that leaders had taken to redress the wrongs of India's age-old caste system. Gandhi fought for the right of "untouchables"—known today as Dalits—to gain entry to Hindu temples that had long barred them as "impure." "To equal that, President Eisenhower would take a Negro child by the hand and lead her into Central High School in Little Rock," King wrote. The Indian Constitution of 1950 had officially abolished untouchability, declared caste discrimination a crime, and created affirmative-action quotas for Dalits and indigenous tribes—in part because a formidable Dalit thinker and leader, B. R. Ambedkar, had played a crucial role in writing it. "Today no leader in India would dare to make a public endorsement of untouchability," King told reporters. "But in America, every day some leader endorses racial segregation."

In "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents" (Random House), Isabel Wilkerson contends that the brutal Indian system of hierarchy illuminates more about American racial divides than the idea of race alone can, and early in her

book she relays a story that King told about his India trip. He was visiting a school for Dalit children when the principal introduced him as "a fellow untouchable." The comparison made King flinch—but then its truth overwhelmed him. "In that moment, he realized that the Land of the Free had imposed a caste system not unlike the caste system of India and that he had lived under that system all of his life," Wilkerson writes. "It was what lay beneath the forces he was fighting in America."

This story is almost certainly apocryphal, borrowed from a sermon that one of King's mentors gave more than two decades earlier. In later years, King took little interest in how the idea of caste might apply in his own country. But the anecdote at once lends a civil-rights hero's weight to Wilkerson's bold thesis and provides the model response to it: a lightning flash of insight about the mechanics of white supremacy. In her view, racism is only the visible manifestation of something deeper. Underlying and predating racism, and holding white supremacy in place, is a hidden system of social domination: a caste structure that uses neutral human differences, skin color among them, as the basis for ranking human value.

"Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred; it is not necessarily personal," she writes. "It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, pat-



terns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things." The caste model moves white behavior away from subjective feelings (what motivates these people to do what they do) and into the objective realm of power dynamics (what they do, and to whom). The dynamic that concerns Wilkerson the most is how a dominant caste stops a low-ranking caste from gaining on it.

The most enduring caste system, In-

dia's, turned a division of labor into a division of lineage. In the Laws of Manu and other ancient Hindu texts, caste was inscribed with rigid precision, slotting occupations into four *varnas*, or ranks—priest, ruler-warrior, merchant, laborer—and a fifth category, outcastes (another old name for today's Dalits). Caste as a lived Indian reality, though, is crueller than any study of scriptural texts would indicate; it's also more fluid. Each *varna* comprises innumerable subcastes, or *jatis*, and, over generations, some *jatis* have climbed up the ranks as others have slipped down. New occupational groups have been incorporated into the system as others have vanished. In the nineteenth century, the hierarchy, vicious enough by its own design, was entrenched by taxonomies imposed by the British Raj—categories used as instruments of colonial control. What fascinated King, during his sojourn in the subcontinent, was how the newly independent state intended to weaken the caste order by insuring entry for low-caste citizens into schools, universities, and government jobs. What fascinates Wilkerson, like many progressives before her, is the ossified model—heritable hierarchy in its purest form.

Writing with calm and penetrating authority, Wilkerson discusses three caste hierarchies in world history—those of India, America, and Nazi Germany—and excavates the shared principles "burrowed deep within the culture and subconsciousness" of each. She identifies several "pillars" of caste, including inherited rank, taboos related to notions of purity and pollution, the enforcement of hierarchies through terror and violence, and divine sanction of superiority. (The American equivalent to the Laws of Manu is, of course, the Old Testament.) In Wilkerson's first book, "The Warmth of Other Suns," which documented the Great Migration of American Blacks in the twentieth century, she wrote about past lives with finer precision and texture than most professional historians have done. So she must have considered the risks involved in compressing into a single frame India's roughly three-thousand-year-old caste structure, America's four-hundred-year-old racial hierarchies, and the Third Reich's twelve-year enforcement of Aryanism. Even on her home terrain, where



she focusses on what she calls the “poles of the American caste system,” Blacks and whites, her analysis sometimes seems more ahistorical than transhistorical, as temporal specificities collapse into an eternal present. But this effect is consonant with the view of history she presents in her book—one involving more grim continuity than hopeful departures, more regression to the mean than moments of progress.

In the nineteen-thirties, Allison Davis, a pathbreaking African-American social anthropologist whom Wilkerson calls her spiritual father, risked his life to examine the interplay of caste and class in Natchez, Mississippi. The work that he and his collaborators ultimately produced, “Deep South” (1941), was the first systematic, empirical study of post-Reconstruction life in the region. Confirming the work of other social theorists of the time, they concluded that the structures that kept Blacks immiserated and imperilled were so entrenched that they constituted a caste system. When Gunnar Myrdal incorporated their research into his own classic report, “An American Dilemma” (1944), the idea of caste fully entered the twentieth-century American conversation about race.

Twenty years after Myrdal published his report, and five years after King travelled to India, the dream of seeing aggressive anti-discrimination legislation in America was realized: President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. Wilkerson emphasizes the recoil that followed this victory. No Democratic contender for President has won the majority of the white vote since. In her analysis, the arc of the political universe bends toward caste, as progressive legislative or electoral victories activate the threatened dominant group. Had observers better grasped white anxieties unleashed by the growth of America’s nonwhite population and the two-term Presidency of Barack Obama, Donald Trump’s victory in 2016 would have come as no surprise. In the voting booth, Wilkerson argues, whites across the board set aside considerations like gender affinity and such class concerns as access to health care in order to support a man who had signalled his commitment to the continued dominion of their caste.

Trump didn’t need to tweet out “You

will not replace us.” Throughout American history, Wilkerson says, white-supremacist ideas deemed taboo have simply gone undercover. When, in the early years of the twentieth century, the Postmaster General banned the grotesque postcards that certain whites liked to send, featuring the corpses of the lynched (“This is the Barbecue we had last night”), the cards kept on circulating in envelopes. With Trump, a twenty-first-century version of these clandestine networks produced what Wilkerson sees as a “consolidation of rank among the historic ruling caste” following the disruption represented by a Black First Family.

The Obamas have been touted, in some circles, as proof of progress toward racial equality. The experience of elite Black Americans is central to Wilkerson’s account, but for the opposite reason. She sees in their attempts to transcend their assigned place in the hierarchy a natural caste experiment—and a failed one at that. Regardless of their wealth or refinement, the system tries to shove them back down. To illustrate this phenomenon, she ranges across disciplines from sociology to economics to medicine, interspersing her analysis with what she calls “scenes of caste,” among them wrenching personal ones.

One evening, violating caste’s pre-written script, she is flying first class. As she stands in the aisle and waits to disembark, the lone African-American passenger in the cabin, a white man retrieving his bag from an overhead compartment thrusts his full weight onto her body, while other travellers watch, their faces determinedly blank. “Over the course of American history, black men have died for doing far less to white women than what he did to me,” she writes. The men and women in the cabin would have suffered no material consequence for defending her, she notes, yet every one of them chose “caste solidarity over principle, tribe over empathy.”

One of those impassive witnesses, the lead flight attendant, is a Black man, and she imagines his own caste calculations. This low-caste man doesn’t know what power the upper-caste man might possess. To defend a low-caste woman, even if it is his professional responsibility to do so, could bring negative consequences. “In a caste system,” she

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concludes, “things work more smoothly when everyone stays in their place, and that is what he did.”

In Wilkerson’s book, one senses that each word choice has been carefully weighed, and her tone remains measured even when describing her own assault. But she conveys a particular frustration with those members of her caste, from the flight attendant to the Black police officers involved in the deaths of Eric Garner and Freddie Gray, who try to rise by rejecting their own. The caste system, she says, in an echo of Malcolm X, has always rewarded “snitches and sellouts.”

Mustering old and new historical scholarship, sometimes to shattering effect, “Caste” brings out how systematically, through the centuries, Black lives were destroyed “under the terror of people who had absolute power over their bodies and their very breath.” In considering the present, though, she often focusses on questions of dignity. Many scenes involve whites failing to recognize the status of successful Blacks—like the white man, having recently moved into a wealthy suburb, who mistakes his elegant Black neighbor for the woman who picks up his laundry. As for how caste dynamics affect those Black Americans who really do pick up the laundry—or shell the shrimp, or clean the motel rooms—Wilkerson has little to say. At one point, she implies that poor people of color are in some ways more fortunate than wealthier ones, because they have fewer stress-related health problems. She surmises that this has to do with low-income people of color getting less white pushback. But the claim isn’t supported by most recent research, and she doesn’t mention the significant diagnostic gap created by unequal access to health care. Considerations of material resources, in her analysis, can disappear in the shadow of status.

Applying a single abstraction to multiple realities inevitably creates friction—sometimes productive, sometimes not. In the book’s comparison of the Third Reich to India and America, for example, a rather jarring distinction is set aside: the final objective of Nazi ideology was to eliminate Jewish people, not just to subordinate them. While American whites and Indian upper castes

exploited Blacks and Dalits to do their menial labor, the Nazis came to see no functional role for Jews. In Nazi propaganda, Jews weren’t backward, bestial, natural-born toilers; they were cunning arch-manipulators of historical events. (When Goebbels and other Nazis reviled “extreme Jewish intellectualism” and claimed that Jews had helped orchestrate Germany’s defeat in the Great War, they were insisting on Jewish iniquity, not occupational incapacity.) The violence exercised against Dalits in India and Black people in America provides an ill-fitting template for eliminationist anti-Semitism.

Even in this country, as Wilkerson prosecutes the case for her caste model, she occasionally skirts facts that resist alignment with her thesis. To clinch her argument that Trump was elected because whites were protecting their caste status, she says that he won them over at every education level. According to the Pew Foundation’s 2018 validated-voter analysis, though, most whites with a college education or higher voted against him. Wilkerson seems at times to have a sophisticated idea of how caste operates in the modern world, with all its internal diversities. But at this and other points in her book she appears to be reaching back toward older understandings of the system, in which each group is a monolith, consistent in its interests and political allegiances, impervious to contingencies or context.

Indeed, reading Wilkerson’s chapter on Allison Davis, one could forget that “Deep South” pointedly billed itself as “a study of caste and class.” She leaves out the fact that Davis and his co-authors were fascinated by the ways in which the two gradients could complicate each other—the ways in which solidarities of class sometimes trumped those of color. Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, and James Foreman, who encountered “Deep South” in college, read its findings more instrumentally than Wilkerson does. The structural and individual outrages committed by Mississippi whites would not have been news to them. The news was that white élites often despised the white poor more than they did Black workers. Black and white landlords coöperated to protect their interests and exploit poor tenant farmers. And some

white shopkeepers, however racist, knew that they had to be courteous to Black customers or lose their business. Many civil-rights activists concluded that, if Blacks gained more wealth and political power, they could compel whites to modify their behavior. Altering that key variable might start the process of eroding the caste system itself.

Today, Republican political strategists are no doubt at work trying to capitalize on similar class and caste variables in the hope of dividing the Black vote, and undermining Black-equality movements. As it happens, a middle-caste Indian immigrant, the economist Raj Chetty, has given us an illuminating forensic picture of the complexity of the castes in question. Gender matters: Black women now slightly outearn white women who were raised in financially similar family circumstances, while the incomes of Black men account for most of a still appalling Black-white income gap. Location matters, too: Black people who moved to “better neighborhoods” as children have significantly different earning prospects as adults. (Counties with the least social mobility today often had a great density of slaves in the antebellum era.)

Decades after King celebrated the laws Indian leaders had enacted to break down the caste system, that system has proved much tougher to dismantle than many observers had hoped. One thing quotas have achieved, though, is increased economic diversity within lower castes—a change that shows how labile the corresponding political alliances can be. After independence, Dalits, who constitute more than sixteen per cent of the population, were a reliable vote, first for the Congress Party and then, in some states, for their own caste-based regional parties. They were nearly as unified as the white Trump voters Wilkerson conjures. That’s no longer true. For the past six years, India has been ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.), a party with Brahminic roots which was established to promote upper-caste interests and advocates an ideology of Hindu supremacy. Dalits and lower castes were largely aligned against the B.J.P.—until it began courting them by exploiting the economic divisions within their ranks.

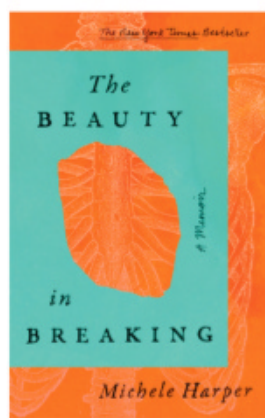
Some Dalit communities had benefit-



ted disproportionately from the quotas for government jobs that Ambedkar (whom Wilkerson dubs “India’s Martin Luther King”) fought to write into the Constitution. Over time, a small Dalit élite, known as “the creamy layer,” emerged. The B.J.P. recruited Dalits who were beneath that layer and resentful of it, promising them economic advancement. Simultaneously, the Party’s networks tried to draw them into the Hindu-supremacist fold by inciting fear about a group even lower in the social hierarchy: Indian Muslims. In 2019, fully a third of Dalits voted for the B.J.P. in national elections that returned Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power.

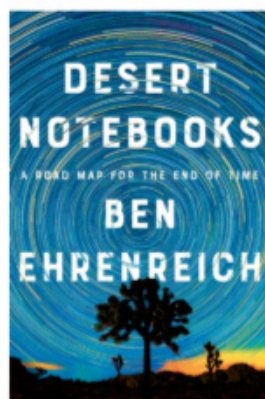
Suraj Yengde, a Dalit scholar at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, sees possible benefits in his caste’s lack of unity. As parties compete for their votes, he has argued, Dalits may have a wider and less corrupt range of candidates to choose from, and more effective representation. But Yengde’s sometime collaborator, the astringent, seventy-year-old Dalit intellectual and activist Anand Teltumbde (currently imprisoned by the Modi government on dubious charges of inciting violence), perceives a larger political failure; he believes that “the debacle of the Dalit movement” today lies in its inability to recognize how class intersects with caste.

Starting in the nineteenth century, low-caste Indians looked to America’s progressives for ideas about fighting inequality. Jyotirao Phule, an anti-Brahmin agitator from a lowly gardener caste, dedicated his 1873 book, “Ghulamgiri,” or “Slavery,” to American abolitionists. A century later, young Dalits who had studied the Black Power movement launched the Dalit Panthers. In Wilkerson’s estimation, what America may teach the world in the coming decades is, alas, how a numerically vulnerable dominant caste can cling to power. She recounts a conversation she had with the civil-rights historian Taylor Branch about how American democracy will fare when it reaches a demographic watershed: the moment in the twenty-forties when non-Hispanic whites are expected to see their majority disappear. “So the real question would be,” Branch says, “if people were given the choice between democracy

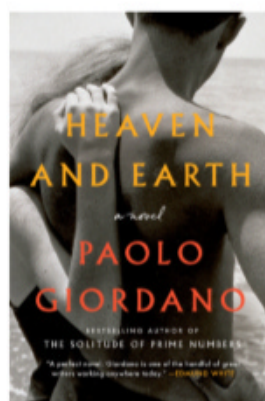


## BRIEFLY NOTED

**The Beauty in Breaking**, by Michele Harper (*Riverhead*). This memoir by an E.R. doctor suggests that emergency medicine can heal its practitioners as well as its patients. As a teen-ager, growing up among the Black élite of Washington, D.C., the author drives her brother to the hospital one day after their father bites him. The emergency room, “throbbing with life,” presents an escape from her family’s cycle of abuse, and Harper becomes a determined careerist. Acutely aware that Black women rarely achieve powerful positions in her field, she climbs the ladder at hospitals in the Bronx and Philadelphia, before switching to an under-resourced V.A. hospital. A witness to “tortured flesh,” she finds that her patients’ injuries often refract her own trauma, and she attempts to treat with empathy rather than judgment.



**Desert Notebooks**, by Ben Ehrenreich (*Counterpoint*). Cataclysmic climate and cultural changes underpin this essay on ecological destruction, which seeks to explain how we reached a “too-warm abyss.” According to Ehrenreich, a climate journalist, human delusions of purpose and exceptionalism have brought our planet to this point. Writing from deserts across the Southwest—whose tenacious landscape is dotted with Army bases and urban outposts—he draws on Mayan creation myths, anthropological accounts of the decimated Sioux, and Presidential tweets to chronicle humankind’s destructive nature. The breadth of reference lends perspective to our continuing struggle to achieve sustainability: as Ehrenreich writes, “We are not the first people to believe we are living at the end of time.”



**Heaven and Earth**, by Paolo Giordano, translated from the Italian by Anne Milano Appel (*Pamela Dorman Books*). In this charged novel, Teresa, an Italian adolescent visiting her grandmother in Puglia, befriends three strange boys from a neighboring farmhouse, who are being raised by an enigmatic religious man. She becomes involved with one of the boys, but her family suppresses the relationship. Years later, the two reconnect and begin living together at the old farmhouse, among a group of environmental activists, whose radical actions lead to tragedy. What begins as a story of summer romance transforms into something more ambitious—an account of eco-terrorism—while also posing questions about the nature of passionate attachment.



**Love After Love**, by Ingrid Persaud (*One World*). This conversational novel, set in Trinidad, explores the intricacies of domestic bonds. After Betty Ramdin’s abusive husband dies in an accident, Betty is left alone with her young son. To make ends meet, she rents her guesthouse to Mr. Chetan, an unassuming, reserved teacher—and a closeted gay man struggling with their society’s pervasive homophobia. A makeshift family forms, but this is not a simple, heartwarming tale, and there are many dramatic twists. Most memorable, though, are quieter moments, such as when Mr. Chetan cooks roti or Betty avoids an annoying suitor.



and whiteness, how many would choose whiteness?”

Whites, Wilkerson anticipates, will rush to co-opt insecure mid-caste non-whites—ethnic groups who have profited from affirmative-action programs that Blacks fought for. She chillingly envisages Latinos, Asians, and other citizens of color entering the voting booth and making an “autonomic, subconscious assessment of their station,” privileging features of their identity that align them with the dominant caste over features they share with other voters of color. “They will vote up, rather than across, and usually not down,” she predicts. As these new “honorary” whites bolster the ranks of the dominant caste, Blacks will remain on the bottom. In Frank B. Wilderson III’s stark phrasing, those middle castes will become “junior partners” in white supremacy.

There’s some precedent to support this argument: Italian-Americans, who now tend to vote Republican, were nineteenth-century pariahs, seen as non-white and sometimes lynched. But, given the increasing range of America’s contemporary middle castes—consider the economic chasm between an Indian tech C.E.O. and an Indian security guard, or the ideological one between a Ted Cruz and an Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—it’s hard to see a concerted march toward whiteness. Too many of those mid-caste Americans seem, in this moment, to be an impediment to the second term of the white-supremacist-in-chief. Wilkerson’s conception of social rigidities may itself prove too rigid to accommodate the complexities of what’s unfolding around us. Today, the Confederate emblem has been chased off the Mississippi state flag, and talk of reparations has moved into the political mainstream. But Wilkerson’s model does not encourage optimism: backlash follows legislative and electoral progress so reliably in her account that hopes for change begin to feel naïve. No law is etched in granite, she reminds us; each one can be chiselled away.

Although Wilkerson considers herself more a diagnostician than a clinician, she advances, toward the end of the book, two ideas for toppling the American caste system. She’d like to see a public accounting of the American past modelled on postwar Germany,

which paid restitution to Holocaust survivors, made displaying the swastika a crime, and erected memorials to victims. But her greater faith lies in what she calls “radical empathy.” She has described her work as a moral “mission”: “to change the country, the world, one heart at a time.” And she concludes her book by celebrating individuals like Albert Einstein, who came to the U.S. shortly before the Nazis took power, empathized with Blacks facing discrimination, and began advocating for their rights. “Each time a person reaches across caste and makes a connection, it helps break the back of caste,” Wilkerson writes. “Multiplied by millions in a given day, it becomes the flap of a butterfly wing that shifts the air and builds to a hurricane across an ocean.”

This resort to moral psychology—a self-oriented Gandhian move of the kind that infuriated Ambedkar—seems a retreat from her larger argument that white supremacy should be seen as systemic, not personal. Perhaps, boxed in by her caste model, she is seeking hope by reaching outside it. But, if the caste model can feel unnuanced and overly deterministic, the turn toward empathy can feel detached from history in another way. After all, were every white person in America to wake up tomorrow cured of what Wilkerson terms the “disease” of caste, the change of heart alone would not redress the deprivation of human, financial, and social capital to which Blacks have been subjected for centuries. Talk of “structural racism” is meant to highlight this difficult truth; Wilkerson’s understanding of caste, by emphasizing norms of respect over the promptings of distributive justice, can sometimes obscure it.

One soggy evening in July, I visited the area where “BLACK LIVES MATTER” has been painted on a street leading to the White House. As young white people stood on the street taking selfies, I did my best to imagine a lasting equality built on what was in their hearts, and those of millions like them. Yet their baseball caps took me back to an argument in “Caste,” about the great Negro League pitcher Satchel Paige. Wilkerson argues that, if Paige had been allowed to play in the white leagues while he was in his athletic prime (he wasn’t

tapped by the majors until he was in his forties), his uncanny skill would have been further honed, spectators would have flocked to see him, his team would have risen in the rankings, and the sport as a whole would have reaped the profits. This line of argument recurs in her book, and turns up in a lot of other places lately: if you level the playing field, everyone wins.

But what about the not-quite-great white player whose major-league career happened only because Paige was barred from the competition? In a fair world, dominant-caste individuals who have historically benefitted from prejudice and discrimination would lose out. When I multiplied the injury of disinheritance by, to use Wilkerson’s phrase, “millions in a given day” in a foreseeable future of economic insecurity, the sustained radical empathy of downwardly mobile whites became a hard thing to envision. I started to wonder if Wilkerson’s faith in psychology had underestimated a particularly treacherous aspect of Indian caste, which is how well it insulates the hearts of individual oppressors from the injustices they perpetrate and profit by. Radical empathy is exactly what caste societies preclude. The system’s fictitious gradations extinguish, by design, a sense of common humanity.

Pinned on the new iron fence protecting the White House from the public were photos of Black people killed by the police in recent years. In the photo of the Minnesota cafeteria worker Philando Castile, I could make out the motto on his school-issue lanyard: “Live Well.” Why, I wondered, should justice for a low-wage worker murdered while complying with a law officer’s order have to depend on anything as discretionary as empathy?

I recalled a detail about King’s trip to India, when, looking for psychological strength, he’d found political strategy. A reporter in New Delhi had asked him about those who had fought him in Montgomery: had he, in the end, “transformed the hearts of the white people”? Maybe some hearts, King replied. Others remained bitter. He moved on to another question. Changing power differentials in order to redress vile histories of discrimination, he knew, was bound to be ugly. Sometimes hearts barely figured at all. ♦



# ALL THE WRONG PLACES

*Restlessness and recklessness in Raven Leilani's debut novel.*

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ



One reason that the novel, despite so many tedious predictions to the contrary, stubbornly refuses to die is that the world that fiction helps us see keeps shifting shape. Take Raven Leilani's first book, "Luster" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), which tells the story of Edie, a twenty-three-year-old publishing peon who begins an affair with a married man she meets on a dating site. You could be forgiven for thinking that adultery, a cornerstone of so many great nineteenth-century novels, had been exhausted as a subject. Sexual barriers have long since been torn down, taboos lifted, transgressions neutralized; from Anna Karenina's point of view,

things would look positively utopian. Yet the heart is as muddled by freedom as it was by constraint, and that is where the mordant, bruising "Luster" charges in.

Leilani is twenty-nine, a graduate of New York University's M.F.A. program in fiction, and from the opening sentence her novel showcases her style with, well, a bang: "The first time we have sex, we are both fully clothed, at our desks during working hours, bathed in blue computer light." That casual disclosure is typical of Leilani's knowing, understated wit. She is a sharp phrasemaker—we get "the high-fructose sun" of an amusement park, and an older co-worker's "bleached, Warholian

cool"—and she loves catching her reader off guard by tweaking a sentence mid-way through, switching up speeds, like a pitcher, so that a passage that begins modestly suddenly gathers momentum, shooting forward in long, arcing phrases that stay improbably in flight. Here is Edie with Eric, the guy she's having cybersex with at the start, together at a club's throwback disco night:

But the beauty of disco is the too much, is the horn section and the cheese, and so Eric and I convene in the bathroom over a spoon and someone is in the stall next to us with bare feet weeping and we go out into the middle and Eric is a very coordinated white man but given to fall back on the cabbage patch and the diddy bop, which is fine, and then we're in his car with the AC all the way up, on a reasonable clip through the Holland Tunnel, and he's handing me his phone and asking me to decline a call from his wife, which makes me feel terrible, not out of any fealty to Rebecca but because this night appears to have generated from some greater marital drama, though of course I relish denying the call . . .

This is a hundred and forty-two words and still Leilani hurtles on, taking Edie to Eric's house in suburban New Jersey and into his bedroom, "where all the pictures are facedown, which is a level of premeditation that gives me pause, but that ultimately eases me out of my clothes because to do all this he would have to know I would say yes, he would have to believe himself capable of finessing the initial yes into the terminal yes in such perfect order that I would even go to Jersey and the idea that he understands this, his total control of the situation, is what does me in." There's a "look what I can do" joy in Leilani's prose that delights in the rapture it describes, capped, in that surrender to "yes," by a nod to Molly Bloom, who knows a thing or two herself about the erotics of a breathless run-on.

The novel is narrated in the present tense, for a reason. Edie can't get much purchase on her past. If she could, she might avoid making the same mistakes that sink her over and over. Sex is the big one. She is, by her own description, the "office slut" at the publishing house where she works as something called the "managing editorial coordinator" of the children's imprint, and has slept with everyone from the I.T. guy to the head of the art department. This has done nothing to advance her career—quite

*"Luster" is an adultery novel with tricks up its sleeve.*



the contrary—though there is a recalled episode of humiliation in which Edie begs the art-department head to take a look at her sketchbook. (Even the past is rendered in the blunt present tense.) She wants to be an artist, but doubts her chances: “I am good, but not good enough, which is worse than simply being bad.” Sometimes Edie allows herself to dream of a parallel life in which, “fatter and happier,” she paints in her own studio. It’s telling that this fantasy is seen from the outside, like a magazine clipping taped to a vision board. In reality, she barely eats, lives in a mouse-infested apartment in Bushwick, and has been in a state of creative paralysis for two years.

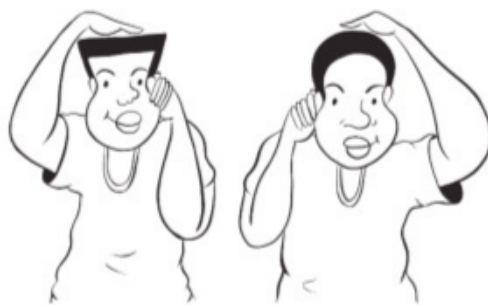
Edie is drawn to Eric by “the potent drug of a keen power imbalance,” a familiar aphrodisiac, and here a lightly comedic one; Eric is a depressive library archivist, not some mogul, and it’s debatable who holds the advantage. During the heat of the MeToo movement, it was often said, by people who were dismayed by the explosion of so much fury and retribution, that young women wield their own power over older men. This is undoubtedly true, as Edie knows; the trouble is that such power quickly expires, and tends to leave the woman the poorer for having spent it. But it is exactly this threat of being used, and used up, that appeals to Edie. Disappointment is assumed; so is the expectation of pain, queasily reframed as desire.

To the loaded differences of age, gender, and income, Leilani adds another: race. Seen through Eric’s eyes, Edie, in the American formulation that expresses racial embarrassment by attempting to hide it, “happens to be black,” while Eric is white, and awkwardly sidesteps the subject: “I can feel it in how cautiously he says *African American*. How he absolutely refuses to say the word *black*.” Edie is used to navigating white self-consciousness. It’s an unspoken requirement at the office, where she is one of only two Black women. The other, Aria, is a sparkling overachiever who does “that unthreatening aw-shucks shtick for all the professional whites.” Edie wishes that they could be in cahoots. Instead, they are nemeses, Aria repelled by Edie’s alienation and slacker’s petulance, Edie envious of Aria’s cold-eyed, obsequious compliance, her willingness

to play the corporate game. Leilani takes advantage of this setting to lampoon the grist that passes through the corporate publishing mill for the “general” reader—the lurid fetish for historical trauma redeemed by white heroics, the ill-informed cultural voyeurism:

I go up to the table and scan the books, and there are a few new ones: a slave narrative about a mixed-race house girl fighting for a piece of her father’s estate; a slave narrative about a runaway’s friendship with the white schoolteacher who selflessly teaches her how to read; a slave narrative about a tragic mulatto who raises the dead with her magic chitlin pies; a domestic drama about a black maid who, like Schrödinger’s cat, is both alive and dead, an unseen, nurturing presence who exists only within the bounds of her employer’s four walls; an “urban” romance where everybody dies by gang violence; and a book about a Cantonese restaurant, which may or may not have been written by a white woman from Utah, whose descriptions of her characters rely primarily on rice-based foods.

It’s daring of Leilani to launch such a hilarious salvo on the publishing industry from within, and her timing turns out to be spot on. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement has led to public critiques of the persistent whiteness of the publishing world—and, perhaps less usefully, to the circulation of a slew of anti-racist reading lists on social media which tend to posit books by Black authors as the broccoli of American literature, to be consumed by white readers for nutrition, not enjoyment. It seems like a delicious



trick that “Luster,” a highly pleasurable interrogation of pleasure, should be born into this context. Imagine looking for a lesson and finding, instead, lonely, mixed-up Edie, mercifully unqualified to teach anyone, least of all herself.

Actually, you don’t have to imagine. The novel dramatizes this situation, not through Edie’s affair with Eric but, unexpectedly, through her relationship with his wife. Eric’s marriage is

open, an arrangement that resolves ethical tangles by creating new emotional ones. For the first stretch of the novel, the wife, Rebecca, is visible only as a name on a cell-phone screen, or in the list of rules that she has written to govern Eric and Edie’s behavior: no unprotected sex, no ignoring her calls. Edie sees such boundaries as provocations, and one afternoon, crazed with longing and loneliness, she sneaks into Eric’s house. She is rifling through his wife’s closet when the woman herself appears, in a Yale T-shirt and yellow dish-scrubbing gloves. Disaster! Except, weirdly, not: instead of kicking her out of the house, Rebecca insists that Edie stay for what turns out to be the couple’s anniversary party. She even lends her a dress.

The spy has made it inside the gates only to be recruited by the enemy for some obscure, possibly vengeful purpose. In short order, Edie loses her job and her apartment, and, after a harried stint as a messenger for a delivery app, is taken in by Rebecca, while Eric is away on a business trip. The invitation to stay, as much an act of brazen aggression as it is one of charity, disguises a grudging call for help. Eric and Rebecca had recently adopted a Black pre-teen girl, Akila. Rebecca’s idea seems to be that Edie can serve as a figure of solidarity and support, a “Trusty Black Spirit Guide” who will help the friendless Akila find her way. Akila, sniffing out Edie’s own isolation, will have none of it. Armed with brutal adolescent candor, she would rather sit behind her closed door, playing video games and watching anime, than take pity on her father’s flailing girlfriend.

Still, as it becomes clear that Edie has installed herself in the house, an incongruous family unit begins to form, with Edie in the unstable position of Rebecca’s partner, ward, and, after Eric’s return, sexual competitor. This stealthy domestic reconfiguring of a novel that began as a challenge to the domestic is an ingenious move on Leilani’s part; the putative homewrecker has become part of the family. Abandoning the chaos of New York for the carpeted hush of suburbia seems very “Get Out.” The twist is that Edie wants to stay in. There is calm in New Jersey. Insulated from the world’s pressures, she starts to paint again.



And there is Rebecca. At first glance, she seems a stereotypical, high-strung suburban white woman, preoccupied with living-room yoga sessions, forever tugging at something in the garden. Yet she has an inner ferocity and bewildering composure in the face of her improbable circumstances. She can be a maddening adversary. After Rebecca icily dismisses Edie's report of a racist aggression directed at Akila, Edie plans her response: "By midnight, I have a carefully footnoted Spike Lee joint, an entire treatise on the conspiracy of oppression, though at one o'clock when I have rehearsed my supporting data and reimagined our conversation as one in which I don't let Dr. King down, I suddenly feel that she can go fuck herself." Leilani thrives in this hyperconscious register; this is the sincere comedy of a powerfully observant mind spinning its gears as thought rushes far ahead of action. Edie rattles on righteously to herself about "intellectual labor" and how "the onus is not on the oppressed to consider the oppressor," before arriving at a simpler realization: "It becomes clear to me, how keenly she is alone." Edie is learning a kind of novelistic way of seeing, one that requires looking into, rather than through, another person. The novel echoes this looking, transferring its erotic attention to Rebecca. Edie, dwelling on Rebecca's body, "as smooth and as featureless as silt" (there is some snooping after Eric returns home and to his wife's bed), is both jealous and admiring of Rebecca's ability to seize control of a situation that was meant to exclude her: "It bothers me that she doesn't wear prettier underwear, that her marriage is inscrutable and involved, and that I am somewhere inside it."

Leilani, a commendably patient novelist, comfortably dwells in such inscrutability. She sometimes falters when she tries to be overly legible, or pushes her vivid sensibility a measure too far. Rebecca works as a medical examiner at a morgue, sawing through skulls as she listens to the Hall & Oates station. At one point, Edie, on a fruitless job hunt, interviews to be the receptionist at a clown school. Although people do work at morgues, and clowns must come from somewhere, these garish touches, in a novel already highly attuned to the ev-



*"We decided to restore our home to its original state."*

eryday surreal, lack the subtle weight that makes invented things seem true. Rebecca's job, in particular, functions as unneeded shorthand for parsing her character, and Leilani does something similar with Edie's penchant for pain. Throughout the novel, we get glimpses of her past in brief, vivid scenes woven into the broader narrative. We learn that she was brought up in upstate New York as a Seventh-Day Adventist. Her mother was a mentally unstable addict who committed suicide, her father a remote veteran given to domestic violence and womanizing. "I think of my parents, not because I miss them, but because sometimes you see a black person above the age of fifty walking down the street, and you just know that they have seen some shit," she tells us, with definitive, moving simplicity. But too clear a tethering line is drawn from Edie's sorrowful childhood to the masochistic streak that emerges in her relationship with Eric. (She likes to be punched and choked beyond the bounds of mere role play; more troubling, he obliges with glee.) The violence, figured as a distress signal glossed as kink, feels

familiarly coded—action that clarifies, rather than complicates, character.

In a sense, such stumbles are the flip side of the novel's successes; both stem from Leilani's hunger to pack so much of what she knows about the world into one deceptively narrow drama. Artistic trial and error is a precious prerogative, and one that the novel explicitly enacts through the motif of Edie's painting. "A way is always made to document how we manage to survive, or in some cases, how we don't," Edie thinks. "So I've tried to reproduce an inscrutable thing." There's that word again, "inscrutable," applied to herself. There is more than a touch of Ralph Ellison here, the hypervisible invisible woman who is cast by the world in categorical terms while trying to be seen for herself—or, as Edie puts it, "I want to be affirmed by another pair of eyes." When she wants to understand something, to really see it, Edie makes a painting. She has been trying and failing to do a self-portrait; the colors are off, the likeness doesn't work. Still, she sticks with it, driven by the truest of all desires: to make her own image appear. ♦



# DRUNKEN ANGELS

*In Poulenc's masterly songs, the solemn and the sensual collide.*

BY ALEX ROSS



At the end of 1940, after Paris had fallen under German occupation, the spectacularly refined French composer Francis Poulenc made a musical setting of Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "Sanglots," or "Sobs." Poulenc was in no way a political artist: although he steered clear of collaboration with the Nazis, he also held back from an active role in the Resistance. Still, it is difficult not to hear the song in the context of the time, particularly when it arrives at its wrenching conclusion:

And nothing will be free until the  
end of time  
Let us leave all to the dead  
And hide our sobs

"Sanglots" is the last of five songs in a cycle deceptively titled "Banalités." In a demonstration of the stealthy power of Poulenc's art, the grouping swerves from merry, irreverent vignettes to a near-fathomless sorrow. In "Sanglots," the words "*Et rien*" ("And nothing") are set to a plunging F-sharp octave, with "*Et*" emphasized to the point that it becomes a cry from the heart. With the next words, "*ne sera libre*," the vocal line leaps back up the octave and then descends the slightly narrower interval of the major seventh, landing on G-natural, which clashes against the F-sharp-minor tonality. The harmony

then softens from minor to major, with a D-sharp adding an almost sentimental sweetness. Poulenc makes the prospect of apocalypse seem like a respite, a moment of grace. The sobs of the title hardly register, vanishing into a melancholy haze.

"Sanglots" emerged during a season of doom-laden music: in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany, Olivier Messiaen was writing the "Quartet for the End of Time," which finds its way to a state of ethereal bliss. But Poulenc may not have been thinking solely about the war: he had, after all, been waiting to set "Sanglots" for some time. Rather, the song evokes a consuming descent into an inner world of memory and regret. Earlier in the poem, Apollinaire writes, "This is the song of the dreamers / Who tore out their heart / And held it in their right hand." Then: "Here are our hands that life has enslaved." Seldom have such complex, cloistered feelings been captured in music of such gasping beauty. With Poulenc, these wonders of compression are almost routine.

I've been holed up in Poulenc's world on account of two absorbing new books: Roger Nichols's "Poulenc: A Biography" (Yale) and Graham Johnson's "Poulenc: The Life in the Songs" (Liveright). Both do justice to a composer who has often been overshadowed by the giants with whom he shared the early and mid-twentieth century. He was no originator, like Schoenberg or Stravinsky, nor did he possess Britten's or Shostakovich's command of manifold genres. He was, however, a composer of rare gifts, particularly in the setting of sacred and secular texts. As the decades pass, he grows in stature, and his aloofness from musical party politics matters less.

Nichols, a British scholar who has written about Debussy, Ravel, and Messiaen, gives an assured overview of Poulenc's life and work, applying a light touch that is appropriate to the subject's man-about-town façade. Poulenc was born in 1899, into upper-middle-class comfort; his father was the co-owner of a family chemical company that eventually morphed into the giant firm of Rhône-Poulenc. When the composer was in his teens,

*The composer makes the prospect of apocalypse seem like a moment of grace.*



he fell into the eccentric orbit of Erik Satie, who had a great influence on his early style. Poulenc was a core member of the enfant-terrible collective promoted by Jean Cocteau as Les Six. His first triumph was the explosively tuneful ballet “Les Biches,” which the Ballets Russes premiered in 1924.

Poulenc’s life story is customarily organized around a central epiphanic event: his visit, in 1936, to the shrine of the Black Virgin, in Rocamadour, in the South of France. The composer seems to have experienced that pilgrimage as the beginning of a spiritual awakening, one that led to an extraordinary series of religious and religiously themed works: the “Litanies of the Black Virgin,” the Stabat Mater, the Gloria, two sets of motets, and his only large-scale opera, “Dialogues of the Carmelites.” These scores rank with the most formidable religious music of the twentieth century, on a par with that of Stravinsky, Messiaen, Ustvolskaya, and Pärt, although their intimate, confiding mode of address occupies a category of its own.

While Nichols, in his retelling of the Rocamadour episode, does not deny its significance, he qualifies it a bit. Poulenc had been raised a Catholic, and religiosity had been smoldering in his work all along. Therefore, Nichols writes, the experience marked “the reappearance of something long hidden beneath worldly cares.” Complicating the picture is Poulenc’s disorderly love life, which consisted of many fleeting gay encounters, a few longer-lasting attachments with men, and a mysterious assignation with a woman that yielded a daughter. This activity may only have intensified after the religious turn, leading to psychological conflicts. Johnson, in his study of the songs, speculates that the composer suffered from sexual addiction, and that an inability to see his partners as social equals consigned him to loneliness.

Both accounts undermine the popular image of Poulenc—carefully cultivated by the man himself—as the epitome of Parisian suavity and ebullience. He was, in fact, a turbulent, even tortured character: sometimes arrogant, sometimes self-castigating,

sometimes lovable, sometimes impossible. That complexity only adds to the interest of the music. The critic Claude Rostand famously commented that Poulenc was a combination of “*moine et voyou*”—monk and rogue. Many of the composer’s works fall cleanly into one category or the other, but some of the strongest fuse the two personalities in one. The Organ Concerto (1938) interlaces brimstone dissonances with rollicking fairground strains. The Gloria (1959–60) exudes an almost scandalous joy, as if a crowd of drunken angels were dancing down the boulevards.

Graham Johnson is a veteran British pianist and accompanist who has made himself indispensable to the art of the song. His most significant achievement is a forty-disk recorded survey, with more than sixty singers, of Schubert’s complete Lieder, for the Hyperion label. He has also published a Schubert-song companion, which runs to three thousand pages. Johnson’s devotion to Poulenc is scarcely less intense. In the nineteen-seventies, he worked closely with the French baritone Pierre Bernac, Poulenc’s favorite collaborator, and acquired an encyclopedic knowledge not only of the songs but also of the milieu from which they sprang. In 2013, Hyperion released Johnson’s complete survey of the Poulenc songs. His new Poulenc book is a greatly expanded version of the already lavish and lively program notes that accompanied the recordings.

Johnson is convinced that Poulenc was not only the premier French songwriter of his time—a claim that few would dispute—but also a crucial figure in the international vocal canon. I listened to the songs in the company of Johnson’s book, and came away fully persuaded by his argument. He makes clear that Poulenc had a deep grasp of the often challenging twentieth-century poets he set to music—Apollinaire, Paul Éluard, Max Jacob, Louise de Vilmorin, Louis Aragon—and that he illuminated their work as startlingly as Schubert and Schumann lit up Heinrich Heine. In a discussion of “Sanglots,” Johnson points out that Poulenc finds musical analogies

for Apollinaire’s singular structure, in which two distinct poems seem to be interwoven.

The songs encompass a huge range of moods: silly, solemn, naughty, austere, agitated, serene, joyous, desolate. When Poulenc puts his mind to it, he can knock out an indelible tune fit for Edith Piaf or Maurice Chevalier. The gloriously hummable waltz in the 1940 song “Les Chemins de l’Amour” (“The Paths of Love”) is one that you will swear you’ve heard before—and, in fact, you have, in “Der Rosenkavalier.” But, Johnson notes, Poulenc changes the melody enough to make it his own: “So like, and yet suddenly so unlike: this is musical legerdemain of an extraordinarily audacious order.” The composer’s inclination toward seedier environments is evident in his knowing treatment of Apollinaire’s “Allons Plus Vite” (“Get a Move On”), which evokes prostitutes, pimps, and johns circulating on the Boulevard de Grenelle. The song begins in a wistful evening mood and ends with a dark, driving pattern in the bass—an image of frustrated sexual compulsion, Johnson plausibly suggests.

The songs I treasure most are those in which a finespun theme runs through a cool, airy harmonic field, like a sliver of cloud hanging against red twilight. “Sanglots” is a supreme example; my favorite recording, which can be found in Erato’s survey of Poulenc’s complete works, is by the heartbreakingly expressive American baritone William Parker, who died, of AIDS, in 1993. Parker also gives a potent rendition of the setting of Éluard’s “Tu Vois le Feu du Soir” (“You See the Fire of Evening”), which is itself couched in a sunset world, with warmth and chill intermingled. The final chord of C-sharp minor glides into a misty, fragrant atmosphere, like Death in evening wear. Throughout his career, Poulenc was a master of endings: in place of the musical clichés of wrapping up and taking leave, he often deploys quiet shocks, which send the mind spinning through the silence that follows. Such moments confirm Poulenc’s affable boast: “In the field of song I fear no one, and being the best is always very pleasant.” ♦



## PLAYING POLITICS

*"Boys State" and "Red Penguins."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Is American democracy in good health, will it remain so in the years ahead, or does it suffer from a painful and permanent case of erectile dysfunction? If such questions nag at you, I recommend "Boys State," a new documentary that casts a cool eye on the nation's youth. We meet a braying batch of them, mostly aged sixteen and seventeen, who are

The movie, directed by Amanda McBaine and her husband, Jesse Moss, begins with an explanation: "Since 1935 the American Legion has sponsored a program for teenagers to learn about democracy and civil discourse through a week-long engagement in self-governance. There are separate programs for boys and girls." And that's the first prob-



*Teen-agers learn leadership in Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss's documentary.*

drawn together by a common passion for politics—not the blaze of activism, that is, but the hard grind of governance. How and why they developed this peculiar habit, rather than lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, as John Lennon advised, is a mystery that the film does not address. The point is that these are the sort of kids who, should their dreams come true, will be running the show in the future. I used to think that anyone who exhibits an abnormal fascination with politics as a teen-ager ought, on principle, to be banned from public office as an adult; these days, however, you can't start early enough. The inhabitants of "Boys State" look as if they used their own toilet training as a filibuster. All of them come from Texas.

lem. How can you prepare, in a single-sex bubble, for the grownup business of legislation? Currently, of the hundred and fifty members of the Texas House of Representatives, thirty-five are women; one way to redress the balance, surely, would be to have their potential successors mix it up a little. It may be, of course, that the Legion *did* contemplate tossing hundreds of boys and girls together for a week, shuddered at the prospect, and decided to cleave them in twain. Let them self-govern, preferably after dark.

This movie concentrates exclusively on the guys. (Will McBaine and Moss take a deep breath, return to the fray, and make "Girls State"? Let's hope so.) And what choice specimens it finds. Behold Eddy, an Italian-American lad

who, when he's quizzed about his political assets, nominates his own abs. "He thinks he is God on Earth," someone says, and what's ominous is just how far Eddy, like so many handsome strivers, is propelled by that belief.

At the other extreme, we have Steven, whose mother was an immigrant from Mexico. Before him, nobody in his family had made it past the first year of high school. Already, he seems older and steadier—less outspoken, yet more eloquent—than his coevals in the film, his only equal being René, one of the few Black contenders in the frame. As smart and as slender as a whip, René has so judicious a manner, and such command as an orator, that he might as well skip these childish political games and head straight for the real thing. He even has a pair of little spectacles, like half-moons, over which he examines a crowded chamber with a mildly inquiring disdain. Why wait four decades, until René has put on fifty pounds, moved to Georgetown, used up a couple of marriages, and somehow mislaid his hair, his sense of humor, and his aura of charismatic hope? Give the guy a Senate committee to chair, *now*.

The boys are mustered in Austin, within sight of the capitol. At the outset, they are randomly split into two competing camps, Federalists and Nationalists—each six hundred strong, and each with a number of administrative posts to be contested and filled. Atop the pile are the two gubernatorial candidates, one of whom is duly elected governor as the week concludes. I won't spoil the fun, or the genuine tremor of suspense, by revealing the outcome, but it's noticeable that all the major players in these battles are kids whose fortunes we have followed from the start. How so? Did McBaine and Moss get lucky? Did they track innumerable boys, perhaps, and pluck out the successful ones from a writhing mass of footage? (No fewer than eight cinematographers are listed in the end credits.) The only other possibility is that the filmmakers pulled a Putin and rigged the whole deal in advance.

"Boys State" will leave you alternately cheered and alarmed at the shape of things to come. True, the landscape of the movie is richly littered with jerks, who fill or foul the air with their personal policy statements; one warns of



“the looming threat of alien invasion,” while others propose that Texas secede from the Union. (These two ideas may well be connected.) Some of the kids sound like budding Nazis, informing us that citizens must be “disciplined yet dangerous” or that “weak men simply create chaos”—an oddly Nietzschean note to strike, in this allegedly God-fearing state. Budding, however, is hardly the same as full-bloomed, and the film never lets us forget that these are big children, who are trying out dumb attitudes as if they were hair styles. It would be great if McBaine and Moss, taking their cue from Michael Apted, whose “Up” documentaries have come out every seven years since 1964, could gather some of the participants from “Boys State” at a later date and invite them to review their junior selves.

I see this film as a soothing antidote to our current fevers, in that it prevents us from making up our minds too staunchly or too fast. A libertarian soul named Ben, for instance, begins by deriding the politics of gender, sexuality, and disability; yet he is a double amputee, having lost his legs to meningitis at the age of three. Not once during the week does he request any sympathy for his condition, let alone use it for advantage. He even jokes about it. On the other hand, he is the one kid onscreen who, as voting draws near, resorts without mercy (and with visible success) to dirty tricks. “We need to do something drastic that gets people talking,” he says. “You *have* to use personal attacks.” Ben is a remarkable fellow. He is also proof that Trumpery will not end with Trump.

And so to Robert, who turns eighteen in the course of the week. He’s a

ringer for the freshman hero of Richard Linklater’s “Everybody Wants Some!!” (2016), and, indeed, “Boys State” radiates some of the smiling tolerance that Linklater—a godfather of the Austin movie scene—has brought to his Texan dramas. No one is more dazed and confused than Robert. Hearty, white, and hellbent on West Point, he longs to project a jockish self-possession, but the surface cracks. In one extraordinary sequence, he quietly confesses to being pro-choice: “My stance on abortion would not line up well with the guys out there at all, so I chose to pick a new stance. That’s politics.”

So, what has Robert acquired from his days in Austin? “A new appreciation for *why* politicians lie to get into office,” he says. Whether you think the less of him for fibbing, or the more of him for being so honest about his dishonesty, he becomes, on the spot, a more interesting figure. Likewise, as Steven delivers a typically expert pitch to the voters, the camera catches Robert looking on with undisguised admiration. His face is a concession speech made flesh; you can see him admitting to himself, and to us, that this modest and stocky Latino kid, who has had not an ounce of Robert’s privilege, is in fact his superior, both moral and rhetorical, and therefore deserves to win. On the strength of that moment alone, the American Legion should consider its job well done.

For some people, I guess, the celebration of democratic leadership in “Boys State” will be a drag. Why be responsible when you can be gonzo? The good news is that another documentary, “Red Penguins,” is here to serve

your bedlam-loving needs. Communism, capitalism, corruption: the gang’s all here. The director is Gabe Polsky, and the title refers to a hockey team—specifically, the former Red Army hockey team, which, as the Soviet Union melted, in the early nineteen-nineties, found itself drained of funds. Even the manager, Valery Gushin, was at a loss. (Interviewed for the film, he unleashes a grin that would scare a Siberian tiger.) Salvation arrived in the shape of the Pittsburgh Penguins, whose owners, sniffing an opportunity, dared to invest in their team’s Russian counterpart. A marketing man, Steven Warshaw, was sent to Moscow with orders to spruce things up.

There was a lot of sprucing to do. The sports arena was a rusty wreck. On the ice, Warshaw recalls, “there were medical doctors driving Zambonis, because they made more money driving a Zamboni than doing surgery.” Undaunted, he launched the basic weapons of his trade, such as advertising boards and a cartoon logo, plus a few bespoke local touches: a Yeltsin and Gorbachev look-alike contest, say, or live bears serving drinks on the rink. (There were also free-beer nights. For Russians. Tough sell.) Sure enough, the fans came flocking, and everything went well until it didn’t—until, that is, the Muscovite mafia demanded a slice of the American pie. Once Warshaw learned that the price on his head was sixty-five hundred bucks, he left town, and rightly so. I mean, they couldn’t even make it seven grand? What an *insult*. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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# CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Benjamin Schwartz, must be received by Sunday, August 16th. The finalists in the July 27th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 31st issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

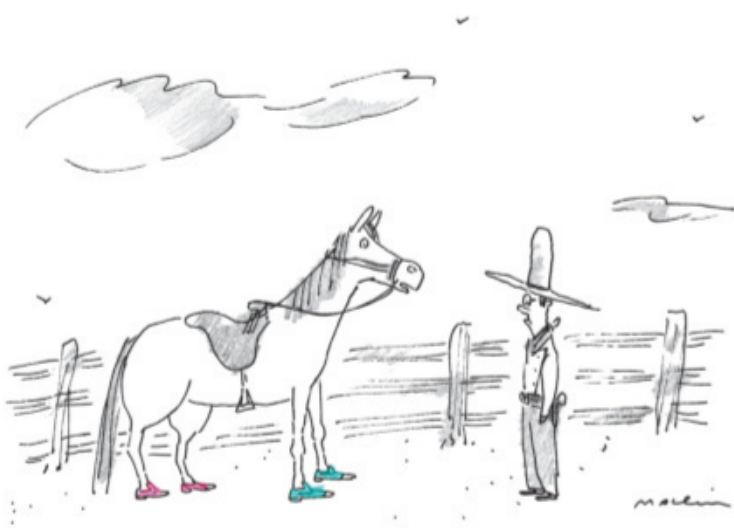
## THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

## THE FINALISTS



*“I don't need your approval. I just need you to tie the laces.”*  
Leila Cheikh, Sydney, Australia

*“Because they don't need to be nailed to my feet, that's why.”*  
Christopher Olson, Minneapolis, Minn.

*“I don't think 'dressage' means what you think it means.”*  
Karen Greenfield, Santa Barbara, Calif.

## THE WINNING CAPTION



*“He could have just written his name on his yogurt.”*  
Tyler Jacobs, Kearney, Neb.



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